

A Study of Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished Myth and Modernity*

Shalini S

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DECLARATION

I do hereby declare that the dissertation entitled **A Study of Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished Myth and Modernity*** submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Arts (M.A.)** is carried out by me **SHALINI S** during the period from **JANUARY 2025 - MAY 2025** under the guidance of **Mrs. C. KAVITHA**, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education For Women (SF), Coimbatore, and, has not formed the basis for the award of any Degree, Diploma, Associateship, Fellowship or similar Titles in this University or any other University or other similar Institutions of Higher Learning.

Signature of the Candidate

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled **A Study of Anand Neelakantan's** *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished Myth and Modernity* submitted to in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Arts (M.A.,)** is carried out by **SHALINI S** during the period from **JANUARY 2025 - MAY- 2025** under the guidance of **Mrs. C. KAVITHA** , Assistant Professor, Department of English, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education For Women (SF), Coimbatore, and has not formed the basis for the award of any Degree , Diploma, Associateship, Fellowship, or similar Titles in this University or any other University or other similar Institutions of Higher Learning.

Signature of the

Head of the Department

Signature of the

Supervisor with Designation

Signature of the Director

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ABSTRACT

The *Asura*, a prominent figure in Indian mythology, traditionally represents opposition to the divine order upheld by the Devas. Portrayed as embodiments of ambition, chaos, and materialism, *Asuras* have long been relegated to the margins of mythic narratives.

However, modern reinterpretations challenge these traditional views, suggesting that *Asuras* symbolize resistance, individuality, and alternate moralities. This study explores how the *Asura* has evolved from mythic villain to a complex figure embodying modern values of dissent and self-assertion. Through contemporary literature, such as Anand Neelakantan's *Asura :Tale of the vanquished* and broader cultural reflections, The *Asura* is reimagined as a voice for the marginalized, questioning dominant ideologies.

The paper examines how modernity has reshaped the understanding of myth, positioning the *Asura* not as a mere antagonist but as a reflection of society's deeper struggles with power, morality, and identity. By giving voice to defeated and demonized figures, modern retellings disrupt the binary opposition of good versus evil that once defined ancient myths. Instead, they offer a more nuanced portrayal that mirrors the complexities of contemporary life in India, where historical narratives are increasingly re-evaluated through the lenses of caste, class, and social justice.

In tracing the journey of the *Asura* from ancient scriptures to modern novels and popular media, this study highlights the dynamic relationship between myth and modernity. It reveals how reinterpretations of mythological characters can serve as powerful tools for

societal introspection and transformation. Ultimately, the Asura's evolving image symbolizes India's on going negotiation between its mythic past and its modern aspirations, creating a rich dialogue between tradition and contemporary thought.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a luxury; fiction is a necessity.

-G.K. Chesterton

Literature can refer to any collection of written materials about a specific topic. Still, it also includes written works, especially those prized for their artistic qualities, such as plays, novels, and poems. From the first whispered tales of myth and legend passed down from generation to generation to the vast digital landscapes of modern storytelling, literature has been a testament to humanity's need to comprehend, reflect on, and shape its reality through words. It draws from the reservoirs of imagination, history, and emotion to create stories that reflect society, subvert conventions, preserve culture, and transform the ordinary into meaning.

In addition to reflecting the times in which it is written, it also acts as a link between other locations, times, and peoples, allowing for a kind of time travel in which the reader takes on the roles of both historian and participant in far-off lives and antiquated traditions. Poetry, novels, plays, and short stories all contain human voices begging to be heard, understood, and remembered. These voices may be those of medieval troubadours, enslaved writers reclaiming their narratives, postcolonial authors navigating identity, or contemporary writers. Literature is not just a record of what has been but a tool to explore what could be. This allows authors to speculate, reimagine, and resist, give voice to the silenced and power to the powerless, and construct alternative realities that critique our own.

Literature becomes revolutionary, educational, and intensely personal. From the hieroglyphic hymns of ancient Egypt to the postmodern meta fiction of Borges and Calvino, from the rigid iambs of Shakespearean drama to the fluid narratives of diasporic literature, thinkers crafting auto fiction in response to the digital age are all bound by the same impulse to tell stories, ask questions, and find meaning in the chaos. The genres they write whether epic poetry, haiku, flash fiction, or speculative prose are merely containers for this expression, changing in form but remaining constant in function. Cultural, historical, and technological forces define each literary era.

The power of literature lies not in its medium but in its ability to connect, resonate, evoke empathy and critical thought, and transform passive readers into active participants in a dialogue that spans millennia. This dialogue is dynamic and not static, influenced by movements like Feminism, which reclaimed space for women's voices and perspectives. Modernism, which fractured form and challenged tradition. Realism, which sought to depict life with gritty honesty and Romanticism, which celebrated emotion and nature. These movements are more than just aesthetic changes.

The rise of genre fiction, including fantasy, science fiction, crime, and horror, which explores the same basic human themes as classical literature but in creative new frameworks, has drawn large audiences and expanded what is possible in the literary landscape. Just as these ideological revolutions each responded to the sociopolitical contexts of their times, influencing the literature that followed, genres also changed in response to reader demand and technological innovation.

While the traditional literary canon may have favoured certain voices from European, male, and elite contemporary literature, we see the democratization of literature as more voices from diverse backgrounds gain recognition, challenging

canonical norms and reshaping what is taught, read, and valued. This inclusivity is not just a trend but a rebalancing of literary heritage, acknowledging that stories from all cultures, classes, genders, and identities are essential to understanding the human condition.

By incorporating Indigenous storytelling, LGBTQ+ narratives, immigrant experiences, and more, we can better understand literature. At the heart of this diversity lies a shared belief in the transformative power of language, for literature is, above all, a linguistic art, one that plays with syntax, diction, rhythm, and tone to create effects that linger in mind, to inspire, provoke, comfort, and disturb, and the tools writers use a metaphor, allegory, allusion, irony are not merely decorative but fundamental to how literature conveys meaning beyond the literal, allowing readers to interpret, reinterpret, and find new insights each time they return to a text, and these interpretive possibilities are what keep literature alive, ensuring its relevance across generations, as each new reader brings their perspective, their history, their questions, and finds in literature a space of both escape and engagement,

Where imagination meets intellect and emotion is given form, and it is this interplay of thought and feeling that makes literature not only enjoyable but essential, particularly in times of crisis, when stories help us process trauma, envision hope, and forge solidarity, and throughout history, literature has risen to this challenge, responding to war, oppression, injustice, and change with a resilience and inventiveness that affirms its enduring value,

Whether in the subversive texts of resistance literature, the intimate testimonies of memoirs, or the satirical brilliance of political fiction, and as we look to the future, the role of literature continues to grow, intersecting with media, performance, technology,

and even artificial intelligence, yet always returning to its core purpose to tell stories that matter, to make sense of being human, and to connect us, across boundaries and time, through the simple yet profound act of reading and writing, and in this continuous act, literature remains one of our most powerful cultural tools, one that evolves without losing its soul, adapts without abandoning its roots, and speaks with an infinite number of voices, all echoing the same timeless truth. when chosen with care and purpose, can change hearts, shape minds, and alter the world.

The term "Indian English Literature" (formerly known as "Indo Anglican") or Indo-English Literature connotes literature written in English by Indian authors. It remarkably differs from Anglo-Indian literature, which was created by Englishmen in India who were fascinated by her romantic and exotic charm. They made India the central theme of their writings. It is "for the most part, merely English literature marked by Indian local colour.¶ The resilience of Indian writing in English is mainly due to the English Education provided by the Christian missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the high adaptability of the Indian mind to Western Education. Indian writing in English was able to mutate by combining typically Indian "feeling," "emotion", and "experience" with the "discipline" imposed by English. The British remained in India to govern, and by the end of the eighteenth Century, the incredible transformation had been all but completed.

The Britisher could now focus on the arts of peace, such as Education. At first, the British administrators in India, despite being well-meaning and conscientious, were without any spontaneous interest in Hindu culture and Oriental learning. Hence, they did not boldly tackle the problem of illiteracy among the masses. Warren Hastings founded and liberally endowed the Calcutta Madrassa in 1781. (In the previous year, James Augustus Hicky had founded Calcutta India's first newspaper, Hicky's Bengal

Gazette). However, the arrival of Sir William Jones ushered in a new era in the Education of India. He loved the peoples of India and their sacred literature, and he looked upon himself as a servant, rather than a ruler, of the people in whose midst he had been privileged to live, move and have his being.

The beginning of the twentieth Century saw a gradual growth of the novel form in English in India. Romesh Chandra Dutt was a vital figure in writing at that time. He occupied important Government posts before retiring as the Diwan of the Royal Baroda State. He wrote six novels in Bengali, out of which two he translated into English: *The Lake of Palms* (1902) and *The Slave Girl of Agra* (1909). Both these novels were published in London and were hailed as writings with dense plots and vivid characterization.

Some other writers of this era include T.Ramakrishna, who wrote *Dive for Death*, and Swarna Ghoshal, who wrote *The Fatal Garland*. Krupabai Sathianandan wrote *Kamala, A Story of Hindu Life* (1894), *Bal Krishna*, *The Love of Kusama* (1910), *Sir Joginder Singh*, *Nasrin* (1915), *Rajam Iyer*, *Vasudeo Shastri* (1905) and *A. Madhavan in Thillai Gobindan* (1916). These are all historically valuable links in this chain that was fast becoming the body of Indian Writing in English.

However, one name that stands out from this body is Rabindranath Tagore. It would be inappropriate to appropriate him as a writer of English because he wrote with equal felicity and grace in Bengali. He was not known as a writer alone but as an equally accomplished poet, playwright and painter. Above all, he was a visionary who conceived institutions like Vishwabharati and gave the world an ingenious model of Education. *The Home and the World* (1919), *The Wreck* (1921) and *Gora* (1923) have all been translated from Bengali to English. However, *Gitanjali* made Tagore a world

literary figure, fetching for him the highest honour, the Nobel Prize in Literature for the year 1913, and more importantly, is considered a significant ground that provided a spiritual interface between East and West. Written in 1913, it elevated Tagore to a literary immortality.

Fiction is any creative work, primarily narrative works, that depicts fictional people, places, or events in fictional ways. Therefore, fictional depictions are incompatible with history, actuality, or plausibility. Fiction is traditionally defined as written narratives in prose, most frequently novels, novellas, and short stories. But in a broader sense, fiction includes fictional stories told through any kind of media, such as live theatre, movies, television shows, radio dramas, comic books, role-playing games, and video games.

The audience expects a work of fiction to diverge from the real world to a greater or lesser extent, rather than, for example, providing only factually accurate descriptions of genuine characters because a work's fictionality is usually publicly declared. The themes and setting of a work, such as whether and how it links to real-world situations or events, are open to interpretation because fiction is typically regarded as not adhering to the real world. Literary theory is the general study of fiction's nature, purpose, and meaning, whereas literary criticism is the more focused interpretation of particular fictional writings. This is because fiction has the most extended history in literature (written narrative fiction).

Literary fiction is frequently used as a synonym for literature in the strict sense of writings expressly regarded as art forms. The genres of science fiction, criminal fiction, romance, and other genres have all been used by prominent authors to produce literary works, even though literary fiction is sometimes considered superior to genre fiction.

Additionally, in recent decades, academic research on genre literature has grown. According to Neal Stephenson, there is currently a broad cultural distinction between literary and genre literature, even though any definition would be oversimplified. On the one hand, patronage and employment at universities or other comparable establishments are common ways for literary authors to sustain themselves.

The Indian novel has been a vibrant and energetic expressive space in the 21st Century. While the grand "postcolonial" gestures characteristic of some of the most influential 20th-century Indian novels have been in evidence in new books by established authors like Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh, and Salman Rushdie, a slate of new authors has emerged in this period as well, charting out a range of new novelistic modes. In general, there has been a move away from ambitious literary fiction in the form of the —huge, baggy monster— that led to the publication of several monumental postcolonial novels in the 1980s and 1990s (*Rushdie's Midnight's Children* [1981], *Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy* [1993], and *Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance* [1995] being three cases in point).

Such Novels are still being published. Two noteworthy examples might be *Chandra's Sacred Games* (2006) and *Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy* (2008–2015), but increasingly, the most dynamic and influential Indian writing is exploring new novelistic forms and literary styles. Amit Chaudhari once described the —large, postmodernist Indian English novel— as pursuing a —mimesis of form, where the largeness of the book allegorizes the largeness of the country it represents. Another version of this idea might be Fredric Jameson's much-debated "national allegory" concept. Admittedly, not all Indian novelists writing in English, even in the 1980s and 1990s, aspired toward the baggy nationalist allegory; Chaudhuri himself is a case in point. Still, in the most exciting new Indian fiction published since 2000, the newer

generation of authors has eschewed the aspiration to represent the entirety of life in modern India and instead aimed to explore much more limited regional and cultural narrative frameworks.

There is no central agenda or defining idiom of this emerging literary culture— and that is in some ways the point though three major groupings take up some of the major themes of Indian literature of the early 21st Century: "New Urban Realism," "Gender and Religion," and "Globalizing India, Reinscribing the Past." To be clear, these loose groupings introduced help describe some significant new trends in Indian fiction. Most texts have elements of more than one of these thematic areas, with some (Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*) straddling all three.

Mythology theory studies and interprets myths, which are frequently cultural fables or sacred stories, and looks at how these stories explain the world, human nature, and cultural customs. The monk John Lydgate originally used the term "mythology" in his poem "The Troy Book" from the 15th century. He did this by fusing the Greek words "mythos" (tale) and "logos" (word). Myth is a symbolic story typically of unknown origin and at least partially traditional. It is particularly linked to religious belief and purports to relate real-life occurrences. It is not to be confused with symbolic locations or items (temples, icons) or symbolic behaviour (cult, ritual). Myths are detailed stories of gods or superhuman creatures engaged in unusual situations throughout an undefined period perceived as occurring independently of people's everyday experiences.

The word myth comes from the Greek word mythos, which can mean "word," "saying," "story," or "fiction." The study of myth and the collection of myths associated with a specific religious tradition is called mythology. Like all religious

symbolism, mythological stories are not attempted to be made believable or even justified. No matter how much the events described deviate from natural law or common experience, every myth presents an authoritative, authentic narrative.

The Marxist eschatological myth of the state's demise is an example of how the term myth may be used more broadly to describe an ideological belief when it is the focus of a quasi-religious faith. This is in addition to its basic religious connotation. It is always challenging to identify the myths that are prevalent in one's own time and society, even though the general outline of myths from other cultures or earlier eras can typically be seen rather clearly. This is hardly surprising, as a myth establishes its power by presenting itself rather than proving it.

The term myth has come to mean deception or, at best, misinterpretation because myths describe extraordinary events without trying to prove them. As a result, they are sometimes taken to be merely fiction with no basis in reality. However, it's critical to discern between myths and stories that are just untrue when studying religion. The nature, study, functions, cultural influence, and types of myth are covered in the first section of this article, which also considers the different perspectives that contemporary fields of knowledge have on the topic. The specialist subject of the function of plants and animals in myth is explored in considerable detail in the second section. The entries on Greek, Roman, and Germanic religions discuss certain societies' myths.

In the context of Indian mythology and its inextricable relationship with Indian literature, it is very safe to believe that in a country like India, where there is not much of a historical tradition, unlike as one finds much in abundance in the Western world myth has become a powerful instrument of preservation of both history and culture.

C. N. Srinath (2003) rightly argues that such a pervasive, percolated mythical climate has been dynamic with a great potential to merge with and even mould contemporary reality.

Myth being ever-present and eternally available, the Indian writer feels proud to employ these sources in his writings more than his Western counterpart. Invariably, every Indian writer knowingly or unknowingly refers to great epics like Ramayana and the Mahabharata to build up their narratives or subvert and dismantle certain myths. For instance, the Indian writers of the pre-independence era, preoccupied with colonial subjugation, chose to employ these myths against the foreign rulers and invoked myths and archetypal prototypes to awaken the feeling of patriotism in the masses.

The narratives relating to the Freedom struggle and post-independence events like the infamous Emergency of the 1970s were also taken up by Indian writers in light of different Indian myths to express their personal and political situations. As such, this fixation with myths as a potential device has been a characteristic feature of writers ranging from the nineteenth-century Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay to the twenty-first-century novelists, including Narendra Kohli, Namita Gokhale, and others of the generation.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an acclaimed Indian-American author, is widely recognized for her powerful storytelling and adept incorporation of mythology into her works. In her novel "*The Palace of Illusions*," Divakaruni expertly weaves mythology as a central theme, offering a captivating reinterpretation of the classic Indian epic, the Mahabharata, through the perspective of its often-overlooked female protagonist, Draupadi. Through her skilful narrative, Divakaruni reimagines the ancient tale, presenting Draupadi as a complex, multifaceted character whose struggles, desires, and

strengths are vividly portrayed. Drawing upon the rich tapestry of Indian mythology, she intricately integrates elements of mysticism, divinity, and timeless moral dilemmas, creating a compelling tapestry that combines the essence of ancient legends with a contemporary feminist perspective.

Indian novelist, screenwriter, and motivational speaker Akshat Gupta is well-known for his national bestsellers, *The Hidden Hindu* trilogy, which combines modern themes with Hindu mythology and is mythological, science fiction, and adventurous. The road to Akshat Gupta's literary achievement was anything but typical. In Indore, he managed his family's restaurant before turning to writing full-time. However, while he was looking for purpose due to personal troubles in 2014, his life took a dramatic change. His haven became writing. His studies of Hindu mythology began with the stories of the seven immortals. The basis for *The Hidden Hindu* was established by these in-depth investigations.

Sundar Nathan teaches at the University of Texas at Austin as he crafts his following books in '*The Naraka Cycle*' series '*Demons & Their Gods*' and '*Prince of Naraka*'. An engineer, product marketing leader, and software industry entrepreneur pursuing a successful career in Silicon Valley, Nathan embarked on a seven-year journey culminating in his first mythological thriller *Ravan's Trial*. *The Naraka Cycle* series will comprise nine books released every quarter starting March 2024. Sundar Nathan has been passionate about mythology and storytelling since he was a boy when his grandmother Namagiri and his mother Saroja regaled him with tales from the great Indian epics – *The Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata*. —

Koral Dasgupta is an Indian author known for her writings on Indian mythology. Her books on the subject are 'Kunti', 'Ahalya', 'Draupadi', 'Mandodari' and 'Tara'. Her

works are discussed in the context of gender studies, myth, art, and ecocriticism. The books in *The Sati Series* are fictional works based on mythology. By limiting the enormous range of feminine leadership and historical interpretation over the ages, these tales challenge the patriarchal observation of the myth and hurt how Indian and South Asian women are understood. The gender responses in India have been impacted by a variety of imaginative translations of religious stories, including oral traditions.

In addition to undermining women's sociopolitical identities, they have also promoted a regressive perception of men that is disguised as valour. Many inclusive, liberal, and modern examples can be found in religious literature, but they are ruthlessly suppressed for patriarchal convenience. *The Sati Series* disrupts, questions, and reconstructs the transforming impact of these legends by revealing the compassionate yet independent voices of Panch Kanya (the five virgins).

Ashwin Sanghi is counted among India's highest-selling English fiction authors. In addition to two New York Times bestselling crime thrillers with James Patterson, *Private India* (published in the US as *City on Fire*) and *Private Delhi* (published in the US as *Count to Ten*), he is the author of several best-selling books, including *The Rozabal Line*, *Chanakya's Chant*, *The Krishna Key*, *The Sialkot Saga*, *Keepers of the Kalachakra*, *The Vault of Vishnu*, and *The Magicians of Mazda* in the Bharat Series. In addition, Ashwin co-writes, edits, and coaches books in the hugely successful 13 Steps Series on various topics, including parenting, health, wealth, luck, and marks. He frequently contributes to the Times of India's op-ed sections. Ashwin has been featured in the New Indian Express's Culture Power List and Forbes India's Celebrity 100. He has received the following honours: the Deendayal Upadhyaya Recognition 2023, the Crossword Popular Choice Award 2012, the Atta Galatta Popular Choice Award 2018,

the WBR Iconic Achievers Award 2018, the Lit-O-Fest Literature Legend Award 2018, and the Kalinga Popular Choice Award 2021.

Amish Tripathi (born October 18, 1974) is an author, former diplomat and broadcaster from India. He is among the fastest-selling authors in Indian publishing history, known best for *The Shiva Trilogy* and *Ram Chandra Series*. His books have sold over 7 million copies and have been translated into 20 Indian and international languages since 2010. He served as Minister of Culture & Education) at the High Commission of India in the UK and Director of the Nehru Centre, London, from 2019 to 2023. In addition, he hosts TV documentaries, most recently for Discovery TV, in *Legends of the Ramayana*, *The Journey of India* with co-host Amitabh Bachchan, and *Ram Janmabhoomi: Return of a Splendid Sun*.

Devdutt Pattanaik hails from Orissa, India, and his parents moved to Mumbai before his birth. His writing focuses on mythology, which studies cultural truths expressed via rituals, symbols, and stories. He talks about the value of myths from both India and the West in contemporary society. His work primarily focuses on management, mythology, and religion. He is the author and illustrator of over fifty publications, such as ABC of Hinduism, *Yoga Mythology: 64 Asanas and Their Stories*, and *Bahubali: 63 Insights into Jainism*.

Kavita Kané is an Indian author and former journalist born on August 5, 1966. She is well-known for her mythology-fiction works. Indian mythology serves as the basis for all of her books. *The Outcast Queen: Karna's Wife* is her best-selling book. She is a writer from the new retelling age. *The Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013) is one of the well-known pieces. *The Sister of Sita* (2014), *The Choice of Menaka* (2015), and *The Princess of Lanka* (2016).

Anand Neelakantan is a public speaker, scriptwriter, novelist, and columnist from India. One of the best-selling authors in India, he has written 15 English-language and one Malayalam-language books and is renowned for his mythical fiction. He has been writing a column in The New Indian Express since 2017. Using the viewpoint of the antagonists or supporting characters, he tells stories in this manner.

The first novel in his Ramayana trilogy, *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012), was based on the Indian epic Ramayana and recounted from Ravana's point of view. Several novels based on Baahubali and Mahabharata characters came after it. His books have been translated into several languages, including Tamil, Hindi, Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada, Marathi, Bengali, Gujarati, Assamese, English, Sinhalese, Burmese, Japanese, and Indonesian. *Siya Ke Ram* on Star TV, *Mahabali Hanuman* on Sony TV, *Chakravarthy Ashoka* on Colors TV, *Sarfarosh* on Netflix, *Swaraj* on DD National, and *Srimad Ramayan* on Sony TV are just a few of the Hindi television series for which Anand has authored screenplays.

He is the author of the story for the Zee5 OTT series TAJ. In addition to appearing in two commercials, Anand portrayed Ettappa Naicker in the Doordarshan television series *Swaraj*. Among the "100 books by Indian authors to read in a lifetime" that Amazon Works editors selected was his book *Asura*. Over the years, the book has sold over a million copies. He has three books in the Crossword Book Award shortlist. Forbes India named him one of the "100 top celebrities in India" in 2015 and 2017. Additionally, Anand writes a biweekly piece on current affairs for The New Indian Express called *Acute Angle*.

Anand Neelakantan is a prolific Indian author known for his mythological fiction works. His notable novels include "*Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*", a retelling of the

Ramayana from Ravana's perspective, and "Ajaya" series, which reimagines the Mahabharata from the perspective of the Kauravas. He has also written "*The Rise of Sivagami*", "*Chaturanga*", and "*Queen of Mahishmathi*", which are part of the Baahubali: Before the Beginning series. Additionally, Neelakantan has penned "*Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara*", a retelling of the Ramayana from the perspective of the Vanara brothers, and "Nala Damayanti: An Eternal Tale from the Mahabharata", a retelling of the *Mahabharata* tale of Nala and Damayanti. His children's books include "*The Very Extremely Most Naughty Asura Tales for Kids*", "*Mahi- the Elephant Who Flew Over the Blue Mountains*", "*The Tale of Naughty Flying Mountains*", and "*The Tale of a Naughty Prank*". Neelakantan has also ventured into non-fiction with "The Asura Way: The Contrarian Path to Success", a self-help book that explores the concept of Asura values.

Anand Neelakantan has received several prestigious awards and recognitions for his contributions to literature. Notably, he was honoured with the Kalinga International Literary Award in 2017 for promoting peace and harmony through his works. He also received the GLF Best Fiction Award in 2019 for his book "Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara" at the Gurgaon Literary Festival. Furthermore, his books "Asura: Tale of the Vanquished", "Ajaya: Roll of the Dice", and "The Rise of Sivagami" were nominated for the Crossword Popular Award. Anand Neelakantan has also been recognized as one of the most promising writers by Indian Express and as one of the six most remarkable writers of 2012 by Daily News and Analysis, solidifying his position as a prominent figure in Indian literature.

Asura: The Tale of the Vanquished, written by Anand Neelakantan, is a mythological fiction novel that retells the epic Ramayana from the perspective of Ravana, the king of Lanka. The story challenges the traditional narrative of the

Ramayana, where Ravana is portrayed as a demon and Rama as the hero. The novel begins with Ravana's childhood, depicting him as a brilliant and ambitious young boy. He is the son of Vishrava, a Brahmin, and Kaikasi, a Rakshasi. Ravana's early life is marked by struggles and hardships, which shape his personality and fuel his desire for power and knowledge.

As Ravana grows up, he becomes increasingly disillusioned with the social hierarchy of his time, where Brahmins hold power and Rakshasas are marginalized. He begins to question the gods' authority and society's traditional norms. Ravana's quest for power and knowledge leads him to perform severe penances and obtain boons from the gods. Meanwhile, Rama, the prince of Ayodhya, is introduced as a naive and idealistic young man driven by his sense of duty and loyalty. The novel portrays Rama as a complex character with flaws and weaknesses rather than the perfect hero of traditional mythology.

The story builds up to the epic battle between Ravana and Rama, which is described in vivid detail. However, the novel's focus is not on the battle itself but on the motivations and emotions of the characters involved. Ravana's actions are portrayed as a desperate attempt to protect his kingdom and his people rather than a mindless act of villainy. Throughout the novel, Neelakantan challenges the traditional portrayal of Ravana as a demon and Rama as the hero. Instead, he presents a nuanced and complex exploration of the human condition, where characters are driven by a mix of motivations, including ambition, loyalty, and a desire for power. Ultimately, the novel presents a thought-provoking and alternative perspective on the Ramayana that encourages readers to question their assumptions and challenge traditional narratives.

Asura: The Tale of the Vanquished is a gripping and engaging read that appeals to mythology, history, and fiction fans. The novel's power, morality, and identity themes are timeless and universal, making it a relevant and thought-provoking read for contemporary audiences. Neelakantan's writing style is engaging and accessible, making the novel easy to follow even for readers unfamiliar with the Ramayana.

Overall, *Asura: The Tale of the Vanquished* is a masterful retelling of the Ramayana that challenges traditional narratives and offers a fresh perspective on the epic tale. It is a must-read for mythology, history, and fiction fans and will appeal to readers looking for a nuanced and engaging retelling of the Ramayana.

CHAPTER II

MYTHOLOGICAL THEORY

Mythological theory, broadly, is the study and interpretation of myths. A myth is a traditional story, often with supernatural elements, that explains the origins of the world, human culture, and the meaning of life. These stories serve to define and validate social customs and beliefs. Religious or secular authorities often endorse them. Many communities regard myths and tales as accurate representations of their distant past, usually combining them with history. Creation myths, for instance, are set in an ancient era before the world had developed into its current state.

Origin myths describe establishing and sanctifying a society's institutions, taboos, and practices. Stories about a country's past that represent its ideals are known as national myths. In one form or another, myths are a part of every community. There are striking similarities between the episodes, the narrative style, and structural undertones. Every myth has a common language. Because no myth is complete without supernatural entities, the same events and insinuations are converted into religious components.

Most people who believe in mythology are members of religions with idols, such as Hinduism, Egypt, and Greece. The only entertainment and pleasure available to folks back then was telling stories. Stories involving gods and goddesses and scenes that inspired awe were more widely heard. All kinds of mythology have gods, goddesses, heroes, dragons, and natural phenomena. Mythologies communicate in the same language and evoke similar emotions in listeners and those who identify with them.

Myths are no longer just myths; they are now an integral element of the cult and culture of most religions. These might be recounted again to emphasize the ancient world's

beginnings. They elevated the heroes to the level of gods by overemphasizing their status.

Every society has had myths, regardless of its cultural or geographical location. They are a fundamental aspect of human civilization, a distinct entity that endures in human consciousness. According to Claude Levi-Strauss's 'Structural Study of Myth,' Mythology is a language that transcends boundaries. It conveys the same message seemingly distinctly but with the same connotations and denotations, highlighting the common human experience.

According to structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, mythology is a language (Barthes, 1991) since it uses the same terminology and approaches. He asserts that mythology may be studied using the same techniques as any other language. Three distinct purposes are inherent in the study of myth. First, the meaning is innate to how the various sections of the story are put together and are not borrowed from any outside sources. The myth is interwoven with language. Mythological language is far more intricate than language in any other structural discipline.

Saussure used the theories of language and parole to examine language. Levi Strauss used the same idea in his studies of anthropology, the kinship system, and the structural analysis of mythology. Finding the similarities among all people despite their diverse social backgrounds reveals the human condition. As Levi Strauss puts it, they are all related. Thus, this aspect of kinship highlights commonalities across individuals worldwide.

According to Levi-Strauss, based on Saussure's theory, Langue acts as reversible time and parole as irreversible time. (Klages M.) At the same time, myth is both historical and ahistorical.

It is timeless; thus, when interpreted as history, it will be parole; when recited in irreversible time, it is Langue. On the other hand, mythology is governed by a third level, for example, the ability to absorb or the malleability property. Myth may be enlarged by adding new aspects or decreased to a certain extent, but it never loses its fundamental structure and function despite these changes. It can also be translated into any language without losing its essential components.

The main goal of Levi-Strauss's book, *'Structural Study of Myth,'* is to find commonalities between the myths of each continent. Despite their familiar shape, myths are adaptable and unrestricted by accuracy or rigid rules. They can be enlarged by adding new aspects or decreased to a certain extent, but they never lose their fundamental structure and function. This adaptability makes myths relevant to cultural quandaries and plays a significant role in human thought, even in the modern world.

Human brains produced mythology; everything in the texts, synchronized or diachronically, manifests human wishes and aspirations. The human goal has always been to have superhuman attributes that elevate humans to the rank of gods or supernatural entities. The human mind is innately predisposed to this fantastical way of thinking. It enters the lovely chambers of the human psyche and trespasses there.

Myths, then, are a part of the human mind.

A myth is a tale from the distant past accepted as accurate by the culture in which it is told. Creation stories are set during the most distant period, known as the primordial epoch, before the Earth took on its current form. Usually non-human, the characters may be gods, demigods, or supernatural beings. For those who believe in them, myths can have great significance and are frequently connected to religion or spirituality.

Certain myths explain the origins of a specific reality and the reasons for the construction and operation of a civilization. A group of people's collected myths, their collection of tales they tell to explain history, nature, and customs, are referred to as legends.

Legends and folktales are not the same as myths. Myths are widely accepted as genuine, set in the distant past, and feature non-human beings. They often explain the origins of a specific reality and the reasons for the construction and operation of a civilization. On the other hand, folktales are regarded as fiction, and legends typically contain human beings. Legends are a group of people's collected myths, their collection of tales they tell to explain history, nature, and customs.

The term "myth" is frequently used to denote falsity. Because of this, some religious people object to the term "myth" used to describe their beliefs, and other academics prefer alternative labels. To avoid recognizing one religion as more significant or accurate than another, some academics decide to refer to all religious tales as myths.

Every civilization has created its mythology over time. Mythology includes historical legends, religious beliefs, creation stories, and hero stories. One of the main reasons these stories endure for as long as they do, sometimes for thousands of years, is their strong symbolic significance.

Whereas the stories' protagonists are typically people, the protagonists of myths generally are gods, demigods, or supernatural humans. There are numerous outliers or combinations, like in the *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*, and *Iliad*. Myths are strongly associated with religion or spirituality and are frequently supported by priests and kings. Many societies lump together their history, myths, and legends because they believe that myths are accurate representations of their distant past.

Mythological theory traces the development of human understanding of myth, from its origins in pre-literate societies to its analysis in contemporary academic discourse.

The earliest myths arose in oral cultures as narrative tools to explain the unknown. These myths served religious, cosmological, moral, and sociopolitical purposes, embodying a community's beliefs and customs. Myths were central to understanding natural phenomena, life cycles, birth, death, and the operations of the cosmos.

In early societies, myths were not fictional tales but sacred narratives believed to be accurate accounts of the world and humanity's place. In ancient civilizations such as those of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, India, and China, myths were deeply embedded in religious and societal structures. They provided the framework for rituals and social norms, explaining the universe's origins, the gods, humanity, and natural cycles. These myths were passed orally, and with the advent of writing systems, many were eventually codified in sacred or literary texts.

In India, for example, the Vedas and epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana are rich with mythological content. In Greece, myths were recorded by poets such as Homer and Hesiod. These early mythic traditions formed the foundations upon which later theoretical interpretations would be built. The Greeks were among the first to engage in critical reflection on myths. Philosophers such as Heraclitus, Xenophanes, Plato, and Aristotle offered interpretations that sought to distinguish symbolic or allegorical meanings from literal belief.

Plato, in particular, critiqued traditional myths that portrayed gods in morally questionable ways. He also acknowledged the power of myth to convey philosophical truth through his use of mythic narratives, such as the cave allegory. While less focused on mythology, Aristotle recognized the psychological and artistic value of myths in his theory of tragedy, which included concepts like catharsis and mimesis.

During the Roman period, mythological narratives were adopted mainly from Greek sources, though often recontextualized. In his *Metamorphoses*, Roman poets such as Ovid used myth as artistic and moral commentary. In this period, myth remained influential but began serving more literary purposes. With the rise of Christianity, the status of myth changed significantly.

Early Christian thinkers viewed pagan myths as falsehoods or even demonic deceptions. However, some, like Augustine, attempted to interpret myth symbolically, seeing distorted versions of spiritual truths in them. For many centuries in Christian-dominated Europe, myth was relegated to the status of folklore or superstition unless it could be reinterpreted within a Christian framework. The Renaissance rekindled interest in classical antiquity, including mythology. Humanist scholars explored Greek and Roman myths as valuable cultural artefacts.

Myth was treated as an essential part of literature and philosophy, with an increasing interest in its aesthetic, moral, and allegorical meanings. Renaissance artists and writers used mythological figures to explore themes of human nature, virtue, and the divine. This period saw the integration of myth into art, literature, and the intellectual life of Europe in a way that restored its prestige while transforming its purpose.

The Enlightenment era introduced a critical stance toward myth. With the rise of rationalism and scientific thinking, myth was often dismissed as primitive or irrational. Thinkers like Voltaire and Diderot saw myth as a relic of ignorance, in contrast to reason and progress. Nevertheless, not all Enlightenment scholars rejected the myth. Giambattista Vico offered a counterpoint with his theory that myth represented an early stage in the development of human thought, a form of poetic and metaphoric

consciousness preceding scientific reasoning. Vico argued that myth reflected early humans' imaginative and emotional capacities and was foundational to language, culture, and society development.

In the 19th century, mythological theory became more systematic and academic, developing as a field of study. The emergence of comparative mythology, historical linguistics, anthropology, and psychology contributed to this development. Scholars like Friedrich Max Müller used philological methods to trace the origins and meanings of myths. Müller believed myths arose from language misunderstandings, especially metaphorical expressions describing natural phenomena.

He viewed myth as a "disease of language," where metaphor became literal over time. Müller's work in comparing Indo-European myths led to the idea of shared archetypal stories across cultures. At the same time, anthropologists like Edward Tylor and James Frazer proposed evolutionary theories of myth. Tylor saw myth as part of primitive religion rooted in animism, where spirits and deities explained natural events. Frazer's monumental work, *The Golden Bough*, argued that myth, magic, and religion represented stages in the evolution of human thought.

He suggested that myth was a transitional phase between magical thinking and religious belief. Frazer's comparative approach identified common themes such as the dying and resurrecting god, sacred kingship, and fertility rituals.

In the early 20th century, psychoanalysis introduced new methods for interpreting myth. Sigmund Freud saw myths as symbolic expressions of repressed desires and unconscious conflicts. He interpreted the Oedipus myth as reflecting universal psychological tensions in the human psyche. Freud's theories linked myth to dreams and neuroses, arguing that myth functioned as a way for societies to deal with forbidden

thoughts and desires. Carl Jung developed a different but related psychological theory of myth. He proposed that myths arise from the collective unconscious part of the psyche all humans share.

According to Jung, myths express archetypes, universal patterns and figures such as the Hero, the Great Mother, the Trickster, and the Shadow. These archetypes appear across cultures and periods and represent essential aspects of human experience. Jung viewed myths as essential to psychological integration and spiritual growth. His ideas influenced psychology, literature, religious studies, and the arts.

Joseph Campbell's theory of the "mono myth" or hero's journey is built on Jungian psychology and comparative mythology. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell described a universal narrative pattern in myths worldwide. This pattern includes stages such as the call to adventure, trials, transformation, and return. Campbell's work made myth accessible to a broader audience and influenced modern storytelling in literature and film. His ideas have been widely adopted in screenwriting and narrative design, particularly in Hollywood cinema.

Post-structuralist and postmodern approaches in the late 20th century introduced more critical perspectives on myth. Roland Barthes examined how modern myths operate in contemporary culture, particularly in media and advertising. In *Mythologies*, Barthes argued that myths are not limited to ancient stories but exist in everyday life as systems of meaning that reinforce dominant ideologies. His work revealed how language and imagery can naturalize cultural norms, making them appear universal and timeless.

Feminist scholars reexamined myth from the perspective of gender, critiquing the patriarchal biases embedded in many traditional myths. They highlighted how myths

often depict women as passive, dangerous, or subordinate and worked to recover and reinterpret female-centred myths and goddesses. Feminist mythologists such as Marija Gimbutas explored ancient matriarchal cultures and the worship of the Great Goddess, arguing that early societies may have had more egalitarian or female-centred religious systems.

This perspective sought not only to critique existing myths but also to offer alternative mythic narratives that affirm female power and agency. Postcolonial theorists also contributed to the rethinking of myth, focusing on how myths have been used to justify colonialism and cultural dominance. They emphasized the importance of indigenous mythologies, often dismissed or suppressed under colonial rule, and called for the recovery of native narratives that reflect different worldviews and relationships with nature, community, and the sacred. Postcolonial myth criticism analyzes how myths can resist or subvert imperial narratives and serve as cultural identity and political empowerment tools.

In contemporary times, mythological theory has become increasingly interdisciplinary, incorporating insights from literature, philosophy, anthropology, religious studies, psychology, and media studies. The digital age has also transformed the study of myth. Myths are now recognized in ancient stories, films, video games, comics, and online communities. Modern myths continue to draw on traditional structures and archetypes while reflecting current social and technological realities.

Digital media has given rise to new forms of myth-making, often blending global mythologies with speculative fiction. Superheroes, science fiction sagas, and fantasy epics serve mythic functions in contemporary culture, providing moral frameworks, identity models, and collective narratives. Online platforms also foster new folklore and

symbolic systems, including memes, urban legends, and fan-created mythologies. These digital myths evolve rapidly and reflect the anxieties, desires, and values of digital-age societies.

Environmental and ecological perspectives have also become significant in mythological theory. Myths are seen as carriers of ecological Wisdom, reflecting traditional knowledge about the interconnectedness of life. Indigenous myths often contain rich metaphors and narratives that emphasize balance, respect for nature, and the sacredness of the Earth. Contemporary scholars explore how ancient ecological myths can inform modern responses to climate change, environmental degradation, and sustainable living.

Thus, mythological theory today is marked by plurality and transformation. It acknowledges the complexity of myth as both a cultural artefact and a living force. Myths continue to evolve, adapt, and resonate, offering insights into human consciousness, cultural identity, and the enduring quest for meaning. Whether in ancient epics or virtual realities, myth remains a vital lens through which humanity interprets its experiences and envisions its place in the universe. While Hindu mythology continues to be a favoured genre, contemporary interest in it adopts a different approach and is consumed in unique ways.

Their struggles and battles may not always be seen as driven by higher purposes. The myths' narrative has changed as characters' universal journeys are retold from an individual's point of view. There is freedom of thought and views. You will not be killed for blasphemy. It is a fun religion with many temple festivals, singing and dancing. Myths have an essential sociological function, helping us to understand ourselves as part of a wider human story and where we fit within it.

They shape our aspirations and give us meaning. However, myth is a narrative of origins that occurs in a primordial time other than everyday reality. The solar system is said to be heliocentric, with the Sun in the centre around which the planets revolve. The word 'heliocentric' signifies that the planets turn around Helios, the Greek Sun God. Constellations and zodiac signs have been named after figures present in the myths perpetuated by the Greeks, with Scorpius, Orion, Leo, and Capricorn being prominent examples.

The planets, too, have been named after the Roman version of the Greek Gods, like Mars- God of War, Venus-Goddess of love, etc. Many astral bodies have derived their names from Greek mythology. Metis, Jupiter's innermost moon, was the name of the first wife of Zeus. Adrastea, Amalthea, Thebe and Io, other moons of Jupiter, are again names present in various tales. Hippocrates, considered the most famous physician in the history of medicine, is also known as the father of modern medicine.

Doctors must take the Hippocratic oath, a medical standard, before practising, and the Greeks gave this tradition to society. Hence, Greek mythology still plays a vital role in modern science and technology. Greek mythology's characters, stories, and themes have shaped art and contemporary culture for thousands of years. In recent times, Greek myths have also been adapted into modern novels, movies, TV shows, video games, and brands. Popular books and films for children, like Harry Potter, reference Greek mythology.

The name of the character Minerva McGonagall comes from the Roman name of Athena, the goddess of Wisdom, and the personalities of the two are strikingly similar. There are characters in the novel that represent creatures from old stories. Fluffy, a three-headed guard dog, can be seen to represent Cerberus, the three-headed dog who

guards the Underworld. Many famous brands depict the extent of the influence of Greek civilization and mythology in the modern world. Amazon, one of the biggest known brands, derives its name from the Amazons, a race of female warriors in Greek mythology. Nike, the Goddess of Victory, inspires the sports brand Nike, whose logo also signifies the 'swoosh' of bravery and strength of Greek warriors.

Indian Mythology contains stories of courage, adventure, compassion, and love that inculcate good values and ethics in children. Religion plays a vital role in India. Hindu mythological stories include Mahabharata, Ramayana, and the Bhagavad Gita, the foundations of many practised religions. These particular myths are stories that tell us about battles between good and evil.

Every religion has stories like that, both ancient and modern. They show how our ancestors thought and what they believed. Most Indian myths and legends have been derived from two of its epic poems, Mahabharata and Ramayana, and the ancient Hindu texts, Puranas. The spellbinding stories in these books excite, enthrall and frighten readers simultaneously. From mystical creatures to unshakable curses, brace yourself for some of the most fascinating Indian myths and legends. Myths and legends are an integral part of human existence. They have been around us all the time.

Indian Theology encompasses ancient knowledge from the Indian Subcontinent, most of which is syncretized and inseparable from the religious and societal narratives about the Pan-Indian adherents. Mainly derived from the literature of the Vedas, the comparatively varied, and the many Puranas. Of the Epics or Itihasas, the legend literature of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The Mahakavyas of Kumarasambhava, Raghuvamsa, Kiratarjuniya, Naisadhacarita, shishupala-vadha. The Five Great Epics of Cilappatikaram, Manimekalai, Civaka Cintamani, Valayapathi and

Kundalakeci. In the fables of Panchatantra, Hitopadesha, etc., and various others, including the varied written and oral literature around the subcontinent.

In Hinduism, there are four distinct epochs, or yugas, and we live in the fourth stage, called the Kali Yuga. This era started in 3102 BC when Lord Krishna left the Earth for his heavenly abode after the great Mahabharata War, and thus began the degeneration of human civilization. The ancient Hindu texts of Puranas characterized Kali Yuga as being dominated by avarice, hatred, intolerance, lust and corruption. In this dark age, the average human lifespan is the shortest, lasting about 70 years, whereas, in the first era of Satya Yuga, life expectancy was as long as 4,000 years.

It makes up a significant part of anybody's heritage. It constantly reminds us of who we are and where we come from. Every culture has its legends, folktales, and myths whether it is Celtic by way of Scotland, Ireland, or Wales. Mythology is vital because it has become a foundation for many religions. These particular myths are stories that tell us about battles between good and evil.

Every religion has stories like that, both ancient and modern. Mythology is the study of myth. Myths are ancient stories handed down from generation to generation in a particular culture. People can learn how a culture thought, lived, and expressed themselves by studying myth. HISTORY can tell you facts about people, but MYTH shows their personality, beliefs, fears, and hopes. Relying only on HISTORY to tell you about a person is like reading someone's driver's license instead of meeting them face to face. They show how our ancestors thought and what they believed.

Myths are our religious roots. Therefore, they are keys to understanding our culture. Human behaviour has been the focus of thought for a long time. The Greeks identified archetypal human attributes in the different characters of the myths. There are

universals in human behaviours and situations. Historically and cross-culturally, humans are interested in investigating, understanding, describing, and learning about human behaviour and situations.

There is nothing old-fashioned about myths; they are as alive as ever, exerting as much impact on society and the individual as in past millennia. New myths are spawned continually, and there is every indication that myths will continue to alter the course of human events as long as humanity inhabits this planet.

CHAPTER III

THE STUDY OF ANAND NEELAKANTAN'S ASURA: TALE OF THE VANQUISHED MYTH AND MODERNITY

Tale of the Vanquished is a compelling reimagination of one of India's most iconic epics, the *Ramayana*, told from the perspective of Ravana, the so-called demon king. This novel is not simply retelling the story but a radical re-envisioning of Indian myth that seeks to question, subvert, and reframe the binaries of good and evil, hero and villain, and divine and mortal. In doing so, Neelakantan taps into a deeper socio-cultural and historical narrative that speaks to the pluralistic and contested nature of Indian mythology itself. The novel is a powerful lens through which the reader can study the function, construction, and evolution of myth in India. This thesis explores how *Asura* engages with myth, not as a static or divine truth, but as a human construct that reflects and reinforces power structures, social hierarchies, and cultural memory.

The traditional narrative of the *Ramayana*, most popularly attributed to Valmiki, presents Rama as the ideal man, virtuous, god-like, and just. On the other hand, Ravana is depicted as the embodiment of evil, a demon who defies dharma and brings about his downfall through pride and desire. However, Neelakantan's novel challenges this dichotomy by offering the story through the eyes of Ravana and his follower Bhadra, thus humanizing the demon king and exposing the ideological and political motivations that shape myth. The novel posits that the victors write a myth and that the voices of the defeated, such as the Asuras, are marginalized or erased from mainstream discourse. By

narrating the story from the Asura point of view, Neelakantan gives voice to the subaltern and questions the moral absolutism often associated with divine texts.

Asura is particularly significant in the context of Indian mythology in its conscious attempt to democratize the epic. The novel strips the divine figures of their supernatural aura and presents them as flawed, mortal beings with human ambitions, insecurities, and desires. Rama, traditionally revered as an avatar of Vishnu, is portrayed as a political figure whose actions are not always just or noble. Ravana, meanwhile, is not a mere antagonist but a revolutionary who dreams of creating an egalitarian society free from the tyranny of caste and rigid dharma. In this retelling, Ravana's ambitions are rooted in the struggles of the lower classes and marginalized groups who have historically suffered under the Brahmanical order. The Asura kingdom is depicted as a diverse and inclusive society, albeit flawed and often chaotic, in contrast to the rigidly hierarchical and exclusionary society of the Devas. Through these representations, Neelakantan critiques the social and religious hierarchies that continue to shape Indian society today.

Moreover, the novel engages deeply with caste and class politics, revealing how myth can be used to enforce social order. The Deva society, led by Rama, is shown to uphold a strict caste-based hierarchy, where the Brahmins monopolize knowledge and power, and the lower castes are relegated to subservient roles. In contrast, Ravana, though himself a Brahmin by birth, rebels against this structure and seeks to build a world where merit and ability, rather than birth, determine one's worth. However, the novel does not present a utopian vision; Ravana's rule is marked by its contradictions, violence, and tyranny. This ambiguity adds depth to the narrative, illustrating that myth, like history, is complex and multifaceted. Thus, Neelakantan avoids romanticizing

Ravana but uses his story to explore the moral grey zones often omitted in traditional mythological narratives.

Asura also underscores the role of storytelling in shaping collective memory. The character of Bhadra, an ordinary man who becomes a loyal follower of Ravana, represents the voice of the ordinary people whose lives are impacted by the grand narratives of kings and gods. Bhadra's perspective offers a grounded and often cynical view of events, highlighting the disconnect between the rulers and the ruled, the myth and the lived reality. His voice is a counterpoint to Ravana's grand vision and provides a much-needed critique of power, regardless of who wields it. Through Bhadra, Neelakantan reinforces the idea that myth is not only about gods and kings but also about the people who live in their shadows. This democratization of myth challenges the elitism of traditional epics and emphasizes the importance of alternative narratives.

Another critical aspect of Neelakantan's approach is his situating myth within the broader context of Indian history and culture. He draws parallels between the ancient and contemporary past, showing how the concerns of Ravana's time, social inequality, political power, and cultural identity are still relevant today. In doing so, the novel becomes not just a retelling of a myth but a commentary on the socio-political realities of modern India. The depiction of Ravana's struggle to unify diverse peoples, his attempts at social reform, and his eventual failure echo the challenges faced by modern leaders and reformers. Neelakantan thus uses myth as a mirror to reflect upon the aspirations and failures of Indian modernity.

Furthermore, *Asura* highlights the constructed nature of myth by drawing attention to its narrative mechanisms. The novel is self-conscious about its role as a counter-narrative, often pointing out the inconsistencies and biases in the traditional versions of

the *Ramayana*. Ravana frequently questions the divine status of Rama, exposing the political motives behind deification. Similarly, Bhadra critiques the romanticization of war and valour, portraying it instead as a brutal and senseless enterprise that devastates the lives of ordinary people. These narrative strategies reveal the ideological underpinnings of myth and invite the reader to adopt a critical stance toward traditional narratives.

Neelakantan aligns himself with a broader tradition of subversive storytelling that seeks to challenge hegemonic discourses and recover marginalized voices.

The novel also engages with the theme of identity, both personal and collective. Ravana's quest is not merely political; it is also existential. He grapples with questions of self-worth, legacy, and belonging. Despite his immense power and intellect, he remains haunted by insecurities and a sense of inadequacy, especially about the Devas. His identity as an *Asura* is both a source of pride and a burden, as it defines him in opposition to the dominant order. This exploration of identity resonates with the experiences of communities in India that have been historically stigmatized, stigmatized, or excluded, such as the Dalits and other marginalized groups. Through Ravana's internal conflict, Neelakantan sheds light on social exclusion's psychological and emotional dimensions and the desire for recognition and dignity.

At the same time, the novel cautions against the dangers of idealism and unchecked ambition. Ravana's downfall is not simply the result of divine intervention or moral failure; it is the outcome of his inability to reconcile his ideals with the practical demands of governance. His ego, impulsiveness, and desire for control undermine his dream of a just and inclusive society. Neelakantan thus presents a nuanced portrait of

Ravana not as a hero or a villain but as a profoundly human figure whose strengths and weaknesses are intricately intertwined. This complexity adds to the richness of the novel and reinforces the idea that myth should be read not as a moral guidebook but as a reflection of

Neelakantan's work is the depth of his political engagement and his attempt to write from below from the vantage point of those silenced in dominant discourse. In *Asura*, myth is not treated as sacrosanct but as a living, contested terrain that must be constantly questioned and reimagined in light of changing societal values.

Neelakantan's approach is particularly relevant in contemporary India, where questions of social justice, caste inequality, and historical representation continue to dominate public discourse. The novel becomes a site of resistance against dominant narratives' homogenizing tendencies, especially those that seek to portray India's mythic past as a unified and idealized golden age.

The novel's mythopoeic power lies in its ability to make ancient characters speak to modern realities. Ravana's dream of a classless, caste free society is framed not merely as a fantasy but as a legitimate ideological alternative to the hierarchical order maintained by the Devas. The idea that history and mythology have been written by victors an assertion often repeated in contemporary political debates resonates strongly through Ravana's narration. His lament that his people, the Asuras, have been remembered only as demons, while their contributions to civilization have been erased, echoes the complaints of many communities in India that their histories have been suppressed or rewritten to suit dominant ideologies. Neelakantan, through *Asura*, is engaging in what can be called narrative justice a restoration of voice to the silenced, dignity to the vilified, and complexity to the caricatured.

It is also worth noting the role of language and tone in shaping the mythic atmosphere of the novel. Neelakantan deliberately avoids traditional epics' lofty, moralizing tone and instead uses direct, accessible prose that often borders on the colloquial. This stylistic choice humanizes characters and makes them feel immediate and relatable. Ravana is not a distant, mythic being but a man who bleeds, loves, mourns, and errs. The accessibility of language serves an ideological function. It brings myth down from the heavens to the earth, placing it within the commoner's reach. In a sense, Neelakantan is engaging in a process of demystification, where the divine is rendered human and, therefore, subject to critique.

The character of Bhadra is especially crucial in achieving this demystification. Through his bitter, often sarcastic reflections, the reader sees the stark contrast between the lofty ideals espoused by leaders and the grim realities faced by the people. His voice is filled with irony, disillusionment, and raw emotion, providing an anchor of realism in a narrative otherwise populated by kings, priests, and warriors. Bhadra's story shows that history, and by extension myth, is experienced differently by those at the bottom of the social pyramid. For him, neither Rama nor Ravana is an unequivocal hero; both are flawed, bring suffering, and leave the commoner essentially unchanged in his misery. In elevating Bhadra's voice, Neelakantan extends the democratizing impulse of the novel and redefines who gets to be the subject of myth.

The novel also delves into the gender politics of myth. While *Asura* does not centre on female characters to the extent that other retellings like Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* do, it still offers glimpses into the lives of women affected by Ravana's reign and the war with Rama. Characters like Kaikesi, Ravana's mother, are portrayed as strong, influential figures with their own moral and political agency. The abduction of

Sita, a pivotal event in the *Ramayana*, is presented in *Asura* not merely as a divine episode but as a political miscalculation and a profoundly human failure.

While Ravana's obsession with Sita is part of his mythic downfall, Neelakantan emphasizes this act's emotional and political consequences, particularly for Ravana. It is not simply lust or pride that drives him, but a combination of wounded ego, desperation, and a misreading of his invincibility. This humanized portrayal strips away the moral absolutism of the original epic and invites the reader to engage with characters in their full psychological complexity. Another critical theme in the novel is the relationship between myth and geography. Neelakantan pays close attention to his characters' cultural and regional specificities, drawing distinctions between the North Indian Deva world and the Southern Asura cultural space.

This geographical distinction is not just spatial but symbolic. It represents different worldviews, values, and political structures. The Asuras are associated with the South, Dravidian culture, and a more anarchic, egalitarian social order. The Devas, by contrast, represent northern Aryan values of order, hierarchy, and dharma. In this way, the novel implicitly critiques the Aryanization of Indian mythology and recovers Dravidian cultural pride. This regional politics of myth is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where language, caste, and regional identity play a significant role in cultural self-definition. Neelakantan's reworking of Ravana as a Dravidian hero who resists Aryan domination fits within a larger discourse of South Indian resistance to North Indian cultural hegemony, making *Asura* not just a literary project but a political one.

In a broader sense, *Asura* reflects the postmodern turn in mythological fiction, where meta-narratives are challenged and plurality is embraced. The novel does not offer a singular, definitive version of events but presents multiple voices, conflicting

memories, and contradictory truths. This narrative fragmentation mirrors the pluralism of Indian society itself, where every region, caste, and community has its version of the epics. In embracing this plurality, Neelakantan affirms the richness of Indian myth and its capacity for endless reinvention. He reminds us that myths are not fossils of a dead past but living organisms that adapt, evolve, and speak anew to each generation.

Asura serves as a reminder of the power of literature to reshape cultural consciousness. In reimagining Ravana not as a villain but as a tragic, visionary, and profoundly human figure, Neelakantan invites readers to empathize with the other side, question inherited narratives, and consider the ethical implications of storytelling. The novel's popularity also indicates a growing appetite among Indian readers for stories that challenge the status quo and explore the untold dimensions of their cultural heritage. It represents a shift in literary taste from reverence to rebellion, from idealism to interrogation.

In examining *Asura* through the lens of literary theory, one can recognize parallels with Roland Barthes' conception of myth as a form of ideological speech. In his seminal work *Mythologies*, Barthes argues that myth is not simply a story or narrative from antiquity but a mode of communication that transforms history into nature, making socially constructed ideologies appear natural and eternal. This insight is crucial when interpreting how the dominant *Ramayana* narrative functions in Indian culture. The divinization of Rama and the demonization of Ravana is not merely a literary device but a cultural act, one that reinforces specific values of obedience, purity, patriarchy, and caste hierarchy as divine imperatives rather than socio-political constructs.

Neelakantan, knowingly or unknowingly, aligns with Barthes' deconstructionist method by presenting *Asura* as a counter-myth that lays bare the mechanisms of myth-making.

He exposes how Ravana's demonization is not a reflection of moral truth but a result of ideological hegemony, wherein the victors' narrative becomes sacred history.

This narrative hegemony has real consequences in the Indian social and political landscape. The *Ramayana* has long been used as a moral text and a cultural blueprint for governance and social order. The construction of Rama as Maryada Purushottam, the ideal man, has influenced gender roles, political ideals, and conceptions of justice in mainstream Hindu society. The celebration of Rama's return to Ayodhya as Diwali, the framing of Sita's chastity as the gold standard of womanhood, and the vilification of Ravana as the eternal outsider all point to how myth becomes embodied in ritual, belief, and national identity. Neelakantan's retelling, therefore, is a radical gesture. It seeks to disturb the naturalized sanctity of the epic and reintroduce it as a site of contestation.

Moreover, the relationship between myth and power is underscored throughout the novel. Ravana's rejection of the Deva order is not merely a spiritual or personal rebellion but a political act threatening the stability of a system built on divine justification. In challenging the Devas' claim to moral and cosmic authority, Ravana represents a dissenting voice often silenced in myth and history. The Deva's characterization as protectors of dharma and upholders of cosmic balance are presented in *Asura* as a self-serving narrative that masks their violence, exclusion, and ambition. Ravana's Asura kingdom, despite its flaws, is envisioned as a space of potential— where caste is questioned, labour is respected, and multiple faiths and cultures coexist. It is, in many ways, a utopian impulse thwarted by the might of the Deva empire, whose victory ensures the continuation of a rigidly stratified society.

This reading of Ravana as a tragic antihero places *Asura* in the broader tradition of revisionist literature, particularly the works that seek to recover the voices of the

defeated. In global literature, this approach finds resonance with works like Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which tells the story of the —*Madwoman in the attic* from *Jane Eyre*, or Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, which presents Canadian history from an Indigenous perspective. These works challenge colonial narratives by centering the marginalized voice, *Asura* challenges the Brahmanical, patriarchal, and northern hegemonic version of Indian mythology. It engages in a form of literary decolonization, restoring dignity and complexity to figures dismissed as savage, irrational, or demonic.

Neelakantan's project is not an uncritical glorification of Ravana. Much of the novel's richness comes from recognizing that Ravana is deeply flawed, like all humans. His intelligence is undermined by pride, his ambition by insecurity, and his love by obsession. The novel does not resolve the contradiction of a leader who dreams of liberation but rules with violence; instead, it is foregrounded as a tragic truth. This ambivalence is what elevates *Asura* above a simple inversion of the *Ramayana*. It refuses to offer easy binaries or idealized alternatives. Instead, it presents myth as a mirror that reflects the human condition in all its ambiguous aspirations, limitations, and failures.

The theme of memory and oral tradition also plays a vital role in *Asura*. While the *Ramayana* is often considered a written text authored, fixed, and canonized, the *Asura* narrative is portrayed as oral, fluid, and vulnerable to erasure. This distinction is not accidental. Oral traditions have historically been the domain of marginalized communities, whose histories were not preserved in script but passed down through performance, ritual, and collective memory. By writing *Asura*, Neelakantan textualizes oral memory, giving it permanence and legitimacy in a literary world that has long

privileged the written word. In doing so, he also engages in a recovery project, rescuing the stories that were never allowed to be told from oblivion.

Furthermore, the myth of Ravana in Indian folk traditions is far more diverse than the monolithic portrayal in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. In certain Tamil, Kannada, and Telugu epic versions, Ravana is depicted with greater sympathy, sometimes even reverence. In Sri Lanka, he is a cultural icon; in some tribal retellings, he is seen as a victim of Brahmanical aggression. Neelakantan's novel draws from this reservoir of counter-narratives, bringing them into conversation with the mainstream. This pluralism of myth is essential to the Indian ethos, and *Asura* reminds us that no story is ever final, that every telling is a political act, and that every silence is a site of struggle.

Even the symbolic structures in *Asura* are repurposed to reflect alternative values. Mount Kailash, the seat of Shiva and a sacred space in traditional Hinduism, is reimagined regarding Ravana's devotion and the shifting power dynamics between the gods and the Asuras. Lanka, far from being a place of sin and vice, is a flourishing, complex society with its institutions, ambitions, and contradictions. These spatial reimaginings underscore Neelakantan's commitment to revising the very geography of myth, grounding it in a more inclusive cartography of cultural identity.

As the novel progresses, it also begins to interrogate the cost of war and empire. The great war between Rama and Ravana, often celebrated as the triumph of good over evil, is portrayed here as a catastrophic event that devastates both sides. The human cost of the war, the death, displacement, and disillusionment of ordinary people, is highlighted repeatedly through Bhadra's narration. His experiences mirror those of countless unnamed characters who suffer in the margins of great myths. This emphasis

on the lived consequences of mythic events forces the reader to reconsider what is gained and lost in the pursuit of epic glory.

The war that forms the novel's climax is not merely a battle between two kings or two armies but an allegorical confrontation between two visions of civilization. On one side stands Rama's regimented, orderly, dharma-bound society, structured on divine will and caste obligation; on the other, Ravana's anarchic, fiercely independent, and imperfect but aspirational society, which seeks to give voice to those outside the pale of Vedic tradition. Neelakantan does not fall into the trap of idealizing either camp.

Instead, the war is presented as inevitable but tragic a culmination of clashing ideologies, neither immune to failure nor hypocrisy. The image of Lanka in ruins at the end of the novel is more than the fall of a kingdom; it is the silencing of a vision of India that might have been an India less constrained by orthodoxy, less burdened by hierarchy, and perhaps more open to diversity.

What makes *Asura* particularly powerful is its insistence on ambiguity. Where classical epics often render moral judgments absolute, rewarding virtue and punishing vice, Neelakantan's world is populated by shades of grey. Even Rama, long celebrated as the epitome of virtue, is shown as a king who makes cold political decisions, exiles his wife to maintain a public image, and allows the slaughter of thousands to consolidate power. This portrayal does not vilify Rama so much as it humanizes him, challenging the reader to reconcile reverence with critique. Likewise, Ravana is not simply glorified as a misunderstood genius; his violence, arrogance, and obsessive behaviour are all foregrounded as flaws contributing to his downfall. This moral complexity allows the novel to function not as a didactic revision but as an ethical inquiry into how power and virtue are defined in a mythic framework.

In this way, *Asura* resonates strongly with postcolonial literature's broader goals: to destabilize and destabilize grand narratives, re-centre marginalized voices, and challenge the ideological underpinnings of received traditions. Neelakantan's novel could be read alongside texts like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*, which interrogate colonial and missionary narratives by presenting indigenous perspectives that were historically suppressed. Similarly, *Asura* critiques Vedic Hinduism's cultural imperialism by presenting a counter-narrative rooted in Asura pride and Dravidian self-respect. The novel also invites parallels with Dalit literature in India, which often portrays mythological figures like Shambuka and Mahishasura not as villains but as symbols of resistance against caste oppression.

Though Neelakantan himself does not explicitly frame the novel within Dalit or anti-caste literature, the thematic affinities are undeniable and offer fertile ground for interpretation.

Central to this reinterpretation is the concept of memory, specifically, how selective storytelling shapes collective memory. The idea that Ravana's story was never truly lost, only forgotten, suggests a form of cultural amnesia that is politically motivated. The victors, after all, get to decide which stories are passed down and which are erased. *Asura* functions, therefore, as an act of remembering a literary excavation of buried voices and repressed histories. This motif is echoed in the character of Bhadra, whose memories frequently contradict the grand narratives of kings and priests. His personal history becomes a repository of forgotten truths, a lived archive that resists mythic glorification. In presenting memory as fragmented, fallible, and individual, the novel also critiques the notion of historical objectivity. All history, it suggests, is perspective, a series of interpretations shaped by the needs and values of the present.

The symbolic structures within the novel further reinforce its subversive project. In traditional epics, symbols like the bow, the fire, or the chariot carry divine significance. In *Asura*, these symbols are often stripped of their sanctity and repurposed. Ravana's pushpaka vimana, for instance, is not a magical gift from the gods but a technological innovation, a reflection of Lanka's scientific prowess rather than divine favour. In Ravana's eyes, the Shiva lingam, often worshipped as a spiritual emblem, becomes a symbol of devotion twisted into subjugation when misused by priests. These reinterpretations demythologize the epic and reframe its objects and events regarding human endeavour and fallibility. By reclaiming these symbols, Neelakantan returns agency to the human characters who shaped them, challenging the idea that divine will alone drives history.

The very act of narration in *Asura* alternating between Ravana and Bhadra further complicates the reader's understanding of truth. Each narrator is biased, flawed, and self-serving in moments, which forces the reader to sift through conflicting accounts and arrive at a subjective understanding of events. This narrative polyphony echoes Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, which posits that all texts are sites of multiple voices, none of which holds absolute authority. In embracing this dialogic form, *Asura* reflects the pluralistic nature of Indian culture itself, where various truths coexist, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in tension. The novel thus becomes a model for how myths can be approached in a democratic spirit not as final verdicts but as open-ended conversations across generations and identities.

Another critical dimension of *Asura* is its exploration of masculinity and critique of the heroic ideal. Both Ravana and Rama, in different ways, are shown to be trapped within the constraints of idealized manhood. His inability to manage

emotions, anger, pride, and possessiveness ultimately undermine Ravana's strength and intelligence. On the other hand, Rama's virtue becomes a burden that demands the sacrifice of personal happiness and compassion for the sake of reputation. The price of heroism, in both cases, is emotional sterility and moral compromise. This thematic concern with the cost of idealized masculinity opens up the novel to feminist readings, even though female characters occupy a relatively minor role in the narrative. The silence of Sita, the suffering of Mandodari, and the fierce independence of Kaikesi all point to the gendered dimensions of myth that remain unresolved and ripe for further exploration.

The representation of caste in the novel is more overt and central. Ravana's dream of a society that rejects caste hierarchies is not simply an abstract ideal but a political program. He recruits people from the lower rungs of society, farmers, traders, and artisans and grants them dignity and opportunity. However, this utopian aspiration is constantly under threat from within, as old hierarchies reassert themselves and Ravana struggles to live up to his egalitarian promises. His court becomes divided, his advisors mirror the prejudices of the larger society, and his arrogance closes his eyes to the contradictions in his rule. This internal conflict adds a layer of realism to the novel's social vision, showing that the dismantling of caste is not merely a matter of ideology but of sustained political will, cultural transformation, and personal humility qualities that even Ravana cannot fully embody.

The Tale of the Vanquished stands out as a powerful reimagining of one of the most enduring myths of Indian culture. The *Ramayana*. Unlike conventional retellings that glorify the heroism of Rama and demonize Ravana, Neelakantan's narrative gives voice to the vanquished side and, in doing so, challenges deeply ingrained cultural

assumptions. More importantly, the novel becomes a rich site for exploring the entanglements of myth and modernity in India. Through its revisionist narrative, *Asura* reinterprets a mythological past and raises pressing questions about contemporary Indian society, particularly around identity, power, caste, gender, and nationhood. The novel thus functions as a mirror to modern India, critiquing the values and structures that have survived from ancient myth into the modern age, often under the guise of tradition.

At the heart of *Asura* lies a profound interrogation of the ideological foundations of modern India. Neelakantan constructs a counter-narrative that destabilizes the dominant myth of Rama's divine virtue by re-centring the story around Ravana and his associate, Bhadra, an ordinary man. This act of literary inversion is not merely an imaginative exercise but a political statement. In India, where mythology continues to influence religious belief, social behaviour, and political rhetoric, reinterpreting sacred narratives directly impacts a modern identity.

Asura is called the mythopolitical discourse of India, a space where ancient stories are not inert relics but living frameworks that justify contemporary values and institutions. By presenting Ravana not as an embodiment of evil but as a complex, flawed, and human figure with ideals of equality and justice, Neelakantan critiques the uncritical reverence toward dominant myths and offers an alternative vision that resonates with modern democratic ideals.

Modernity in India has always existed in a contested relationship with tradition. The Indian nation-state, post-independence, attempted to forge a secular, democratic identity even as it remained embedded in a civilizational narrative shaped by epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. These epics have served as cultural

cornerstones, often used to define what it means to be Indian. However, this definition has frequently excluded those on the margins, lower castes, non-Hindu communities, dissenters, and women.

Asura, by giving voice to the losers of the epic, becomes a metaphor for modern India's attempt to reclaim its suppressed histories. Ravana's Lanka, depicted as a society with a vision of meritocracy and social mobility, symbolizes an aspirational modernity that counters the regressive orthodoxy of Rama's Ayodhya. Therefore, The novel critiques how modernity in India is often stunted by a nostalgic return to mythic purity that serves dominant social interests.

The character of Ravana, as presented in *Asura*, is a potent symbol of modern aspiration and failure. He is not the monstrous demon of the classical text but a man of learning, ambition, and contradictions. He dreams of a society free from Brahmanical control, where merit rather than birth dictates status. He challenges divine authority and refuses to submit to inherited hierarchy. His rebellion, therefore, mirrors the struggles of modern India to break free from the shackles of caste, religious orthodoxy, and patriarchy. However, Ravana is also profoundly flawed. His pride, violence, and obsession with control ultimately lead to his downfall. This duality reflects the paradoxes of modernity itself. While modern ideals promote equality, liberty, and progress, human egotism, systemic corruption, and moral ambiguity often undermine them. Ravana's failure is personal and emblematic of the difficulty of achieving accurate modernity in a society still anchored in ancient inequities.

The novel's narrative structure is crucial in conveying modern ideas. The alternation between Ravana's first-person perspective and Bhadra's voice brings a democratic sensibility. It undermines the myth's singular, authoritative voice and

replaces it with several experiences. Bhadra, representing the commoner, is perhaps the most essential symbol of modernity in the novel. His voice is sceptical, ironic, and filled with bitterness at being used by those in power, first by kings, then by gods, and finally by myth itself. He is the victim of all grand narratives, whether from Rama or Ravana. His disillusionment with both leaders reflects a distinctly modern awareness of the failure of ideology to deliver justice. Through Bhadra, Neelakantan expresses a profound cynicism about heroism and power, suggesting that in ancient and contemporary times, the masses are manipulated by stories designed to legitimize authority.

Another modern concern that *Asura* brings to the forefront is the caste question. The traditional *Ramayana* narrative affirms the varna system by portraying a world where social roles are divinely ordained. Rama's adherence to dharma, even when it leads to personal suffering, is celebrated as the mark of a true hero.

Ravana's rise from a lower background and his emphasis on inclusion challenge the sanctity of the caste order. Even in his kingdom, remnants of hierarchy and exclusion persist, demonstrating that the fight against caste is not easily won. This complex portrayal mirrors the modern Indian reality, where, despite constitutional guarantees of equality, caste discrimination remains deeply entrenched. By reimagining Ravana as a figure who questions but ultimately cannot fully dismantle caste, Neelakantan aligns the novel with India's ongoing struggles for social justice.

Religion and rationality, another axis of modern tension, are also explored with nuance in *Asura*. Ravana is portrayed as a devotee of Shiva, but his devotion is not blind; it is transactional, strategic, and often defiant. He questions the gods, challenges their authority, and seeks power not through submission but through self-effort. This

approach contrasts sharply with Rama's image as the obedient instrument of divine will. In a modern context, Ravana's attitude echoes the Enlightenment ideals of reason, self-determination, and scepticism of absolute authority. He is the mythic figure who dares to think critically, to defy fate, and to chart his course. However, when unmoored from ethical responsibility, this same rationality becomes destructive. Ravana's descent into obsession and tyranny warns against the excesses of reason untempered by compassion. Thus, the novel explores the modern dilemma of balancing rational progress with moral restraint.

The theme of nationalism also has a subtle expression in *Asura*. The tale of Rama has been widely used to construct a pan-Indian Hindu identity, particularly by political movements that seek to define India in religious terms. The demolition of the Babri Masjid and the rise of majoritarian politics in India have drawn heavily from the *Ramayana* mythos. In this context, *Asura* becomes a radical intervention. By celebrating Ravana, often associated with South Indian and non-Aryan identities, the novel questions the homogenization of Indian culture under a singular narrative. It becomes a text of resistance against the imposition of a northern, Brahmanical, and patriarchal vision of Indian civilization. In highlighting cultural diversity, regional identity, and historical multiplicity, the novel promotes a pluralistic vision of Indian modernity that is inclusive, dialogic, and critically aware of its mythic underpinnings.

Language and style in *Asura* also reflect modern sensibilities. The prose is accessible, direct, and unembellished, eschewing the ornate language often associated with mythological texts. This stylistic choice signals a break from tradition and a turn toward realism. The dialogues are sharp, filled with wit, and often reveal the characters'

psychological depth. The emphasis on character development, inner conflict, and moral ambiguity brings the novel closer to modern literary forms such as the psychological novel and the political allegory. This blend of myth and modern narrative technique allows *Asura* to operate on multiple levels: as a retelling, a critique, and a contemporary novel of ideas.

Ultimately, *Asura* is a testament to the enduring power of myth and its capacity for renewal. In retelling Ravana's story from the defeated's perspective, Neelakantan challenges readers to rethink the past and present. The novel asks us to consider how the stories we inherit shape the society we build and whether it is possible to forge a truly modern India without reexamining the myths that continue to define our moral and cultural imagination. By giving voice to the silenced, the novel becomes an act of artistic introspection and a reminder that modernity is not just about technological advancement or political democracy but about expanding the circle of empathy, justice, and narrative agency.

The critique of modernity embedded within *Asura* is compelling because it is not simplistic or utopian. Neelakantan does not idealize Ravana's Lanka as a flawless counter-model to Ayodhya but instead reveals its own contradictions and internal decay. Ravana's court is portrayed as progressive in some respects, offering positions of power to those outside the Brahmanical elite and encouraging innovation and debate.

The persistence of violence undercuts the progressive veneer, the marginalization of women, and the consolidation of power in a single ruler whose ego increasingly mirrors the tyranny he once opposed. Neelakantan illustrates a core problem of modern political projects: the tendency for revolutionary ideals to be co-opted by personal ambition and systemic inertia.

Ravana begins his rule as a symbol of rebellion and renewal, but as he becomes increasingly authoritarian, the promise of a new social order erodes. This trajectory mirrors many modern political movements in India and elsewhere, where transformative agendas are gradually absorbed into existing power structures or undone by internal contradictions.

The psychological dimension of *Asura* also marks a departure from traditional mythological narratives and aligns it with modern literary techniques. Ravana is not an archetype but a psychologically rich character whose motivations are shaped by personal history, desire, trauma, and pride. His jealousy of Rama, his hunger for validation, his unresolved feelings for his mother, and his complex relationship with power all add layers to his persona. He is torn between the rationalist who scorns gods and rituals and the emotional man who seeks divine favor and fears cosmic punishment.

This internal conflict not only humanizes Ravana but also reflects the fractured self of the modern individual, caught between inherited beliefs and personal aspirations. Similarly, Bhadra's interiority, his reflections, regrets, and bitterness speaks to a modern sensibility that privileges subjective experience over objective truth. The novel's emphasis on inner life underscores the transition from collective mythic consciousness to modern individualism, where meaning is no longer dictated solely by the gods but must be wrestled with through personal struggle.

Gender, though not at the centre of the narrative, emerges as another dimension of modern critique in *Asura*. Traditional epics often relegate female characters to the margins, their roles defined by the male heroes' dutiful wives, seductive temptresses, or divine figures without agency. In *Asura*, while women like Kaikesi, Mandodari, and Sita are not always given full narrative agency, their portrayal hints at the oppressive

gender norms embedded in mythic and modern structures. Mandodari, in particular, represents the woman who sees through the illusions of power but is powerless to change its course. Her sorrow and wisdom are often ignored by Ravana, whose masculine pride prevents him from listening to reason.

While politically astute, Kaikesi's ambition for her son's greatness also reflects the limited avenues through which women can influence power indirectly through their sons or husbands. Though largely off-stage in *Asura*, Sita remains a spectral presence, her suffering and exile a critique of the cost of patriarchal virtue. These representations subtly expose how ancient and modern societies fail to grant women equal voices, suggesting that any vision of modernity must include gender justice as a central concern.

A significant element in Neelakantan's rewriting of the *Ramayana* is the question of narrative ownership. Traditionally, the Brahmins and elite classes were the custodians of myth, interpreting and disseminating it in ways that reinforced their authority. *Asura* challenges this monopoly by giving narrative control to Ravana and Bhadra figures who have been historically silenced. The act of telling their story becomes a form of empowerment and reclamation. It also resonates with modern India's cultural movements, particularly among Dalit and subaltern communities, which seek to recover histories that have been marginalized, marginalized or erased. Therefore, the novel is not just a retelling but an act of resistance against hegemonic narratives. It questions the very process of myth-making and insists on the legitimacy of multiple perspectives, aligning itself with the pluralism and critical self-awareness that are the hallmarks of a mature modernity.g

In contemporary India, the relevance of *Asura* lies in its ability to provoke dialogue about the myths that shape national consciousness. As political parties and cultural movements increasingly invoke Rama and the *Ramayana* to define Indian identity, the novel offers a necessary counterpoint. It reminds readers that myth is not static but dynamic; it can be used to justify oppression or to challenge it. Neelakantan's reinterpretation warns against the uncritical acceptance of tradition and a call for continual re-evaluation of cultural symbols. In an era where cultural nationalism seeks to fix the meaning of Indian identity in rigid, exclusionary terms, *Asura* stands as a literary argument for flexibility, inclusiveness, and historical self-awareness. It asks its readers not to abandon myth but to engage with it more thoughtfully, reading it not as dogma but as dialogue.

The aesthetic choices of the novel further underscore its modernist leanings. Unlike classical epics' poetic and often grandiose style, *Asura* is written in clear, contemporary prose that speaks directly to a 21st-century readership. This stylistic decision is not trivial; it signals a deliberate effort to make myth accessible and to democratize its interpretation. The novel emphasizes agency and accountability as central tenets of modern thought by stripping away the grandeur of divine intervention and focusing on human motives. Even the magical elements, like the Pushpaka Vimana or Ravana's extraordinary intellect, are presented with realism that encourages metaphorical rather than literal readings. The result is a text that bridges the mythical and the modern, allowing readers to engage with ancient stories without being bound by their traditional interpretations.

One of the most compelling aspects of *Asura* is its refusal to provide easy answers. No ultimate moral triumph, divine justice, or unequivocal hero or villain exists. Ravana

dies not as a martyr or a monster but as a man consumed by his contradictions. Bhadra survives, but not with hope, only with a bitter understanding of how power manipulates truth. The novel's end is considered unsettled, forced to confront history's ambiguity and progress's complexity. In this, *Asura* mirrors the modern Indian condition: a nation striving to reconcile its mythic past with its democratic aspirations, diversity with its desire for unity, and economic development with its social inequities. Neelakantan does not resolve these tensions.

Asura performs a vital cultural function in a society where myth informs political policy, social norms, and even legal interpretations. It offers a lens through which to view mythology not as sacred scripture but as a contested narrative. This approach allows modern India to retain its mythic heritage while interrogating its relevance, creating space for reinterpretation, innovation, and critique. The novel becomes a site where literature and society intersect, where art becomes a form of inquiry rather than affirmation. In doing so, it exemplifies the best qualities of modern literature: its capacity to question, unsettle, and imagine alternatives.

The novel also speaks to the fractured nature of identity in the modern world, where individuals are torn between inherited cultural frameworks and the demands of a rapidly changing society. This theme resonates deeply with contemporary India, where modernity is often tense with traditional values. The growing influence of global capitalism, technological advancements, and Western education has led to a redefinition of what it means to be "Indian." Still, this process is far from linear or straightforward. Neelakantan's treatment of Ravana's character can reflect the struggles many modern Indians face in reconciling these conflicting identities.

Ravana's journey from being a scholar and ruler with progressive ideas to a tyrant consumed by his sense of destiny mirrors the trajectory of postcolonial India. Just as Ravana fails to fulfil the promises of his revolution, India, too, grapples with unfulfilled aspirations of social justice, economic equality, and democratic governance. The novel captures the ambivalence modern Indians often feel about their identity, caught between the nostalgia for a glorious past and the frustration with an inequitable present.

Ravana's downfall, thus, becomes a metaphor for the disillusionment that many feel, as modernity brings both opportunity and oppression. His failure illustrates the delicate balance that must be struck between ambition and compassion, between progress and tradition, and between individual desires and collective responsibility.

Asura also critiques the very idea of progress that often underpins modernity. The novel suggests that progress, while important, is not always synonymous with moral or spiritual advancement. Ravana's intellectual brilliance, political acumen, and military prowess might be signs of a modern, rational society. Still, they are ultimately undermined by his egotism, pride, and violent tendencies. Neelakantan implies that when divorced from ethical considerations, modernity can lead to the same tyranny and oppression it sought to escape. Ravana's ultimate failure to build a just and equitable society underscores the dangers of unchecked ambition and power while critiquing modernity's blind faith in technological or intellectual progress.

This cautionary tale finds resonance in modern India's relationship with progress. India's rapid industrialization, technological development, and global integration have often been accompanied by stark inequalities, environmental degradation, and social unrest. Neelakantan's novel echoes the tension between the promise of modernity and its usually grim realities, urging readers to examine progress

costs critically. Through Ravana's tragic end, the novel calls attention to the ethical dilemmas that arise when progress is pursued without a deep commitment to justice and equality.

Moreover, the character of Bhadra serves as a crucial lens through which the effects of modernity are explored. As a commoner who witnesses the rise and fall of both Ravana and Rama, Bhadra's narrative highlights the disillusionment of the masses in the face of power struggles. His cynicism and despair are emblematic of the modern man's alienation from the promises of political and social systems that are supposed to serve the people. Bhadra's perspective is profoundly modern in its scepticism of grand narratives and ideological certainty. His journey reflects the existential concerns of modernity, the search for meaning in a world where truth is elusive, and justice remains out of reach.

In the context of India's post-independence history, Bhadra's disillusionment also mirrors the experiences of marginalized communities who have been left behind by the country's economic and political transformations. Despite the promises of democracy, secularism, and social equality, many Dalits, Adivasis, and other oppressed groups continue to face systemic discrimination and poverty. *Asura*, therefore, becomes a commentary on the failure of modern Indian democracy to deliver on its promises to the people at the margins. Bhadra's frustration with the political system and inability to affect meaningful change reflects the ongoing struggles of those excluded from the benefits of modernization. Through Bhadra, Neelakantan brings attention to the fact that modernity, for many, is not a liberating force but one that consolidates power in the hands of the few while keeping the majority in a state of subjugation.

The theme of identity is also intricately tied to the question of nationhood. The novel challenges the homogenizing narratives of Indian identity that political and cultural elites have constructed. With its diverse society of scholars, soldiers, and thinkers, Ravana's Lanka offers an alternative vision of India that values pluralism, intellectual freedom, and merit. This starkly contrasts with the monolithic vision of India, often championed by nationalist movements, emphasizing religious and cultural uniformity. In this way, *Asura* becomes a critique of the nationalism that seeks to define India solely in terms of Hindu religious identity, ignoring the country's rich diversity of beliefs, practices, and traditions.

Neelakantan's revision of the *Ramayana* suggests that the ideal of a unified, homogeneous nation-state, often celebrated in nationalist rhetoric, is a myth. The reality of India's plurality its languages, cultures, religions, and histories cannot be reduced to a single narrative. The novel proposes that the future of India lies in embracing this diversity and accepting the multiplicity of identities within its borders. As the ruler of a multicultural Lanka, Ravana represents this inclusive vision of India. At the same time, Rama's Ayodhya, with its rigid moral order and hierarchical structure, embodies the exclusionary nationalism that seeks to impose a singular identity on the nation.

The caste question is also central to the novel's interrogation of modernity. In his portrayal of Ravana, Neelakantan presents a figure who rises above his low-caste origins to become a mighty king. Ravana's meritocratic ideals, in contrast to the rigid caste system of the *Ramayana*, critique the social stratification that continues to plague modern India. The novel suggests that while caste may have been legitimized by religious texts and rituals in ancient times, it is anathema to the ideals of modernity, which demand equality and social justice. Ravana's dream of a society in which people

are judged by their abilities rather than their birth is an ideal that remains out of reach in modern India, where caste-based discrimination continues to shape people's lives in profound ways.

The novel does not present an idealized vision of Ravana's Lanka. Just as modern India's democratic project has been marred by corruption, inequality, and violence, Ravana's kingdom is shown to be imperfect, marked by internal divisions and a power struggle. Neelakantan's portrayal of Ravana's eventual decline suggests that the path to modernity is fraught with difficulties and setbacks. The ideal of a just society, where individuals are free to pursue their dreams without being constrained by caste or birth, is noble but difficult to achieve. Like India's struggles with social and economic inequality, Ravana's failure reflects the inherent challenges of building a truly modern, just society.

Asura's relationship between myth and modernity also speaks to how societies engage with their past. In India, the legacy of colonialism, along with the influence of global capitalism and Western thought, has led to a complex relationship with tradition. While some seek to preserve and celebrate India's ancient culture, others look to modernity as a means of progress and liberation. *Asura* complicates this dichotomy by showing that myth and modernity are intertwined and cannot be understood in isolation. The novel suggests that modernity in India cannot be built by rejecting the past; instead, it requires a critical engagement with it, acknowledging its strengths and flaws. In this sense, *Asura* calls for a more nuanced approach to modernity that does not erase or idealize the past but instead learns from it and adapts it to contemporary realities.

By giving voice to the vanquished, *Asura* emphasizes the need to listen to the stories of those excluded or silenced by history. In this way, Neelakantan's novel

becomes a vehicle for social change, urging readers to reflect on how power and knowledge are distributed in society. Through Ravana, Bhadra, and the other characters who inhabit the margins of the epic, the novel challenges readers to reconsider their assumptions about justice, identity, and progress in modern India.

Mythology has long been a powerful tool for social cohesion, offering archetypal narratives that define the values of a society. In ancient India, myths like the *Ramayana* were religious texts and vehicles for imparting cultural norms and moral lessons. Whether divine or demonic, the characters in these myths embodied certain societal ideals or flaws. In traditional readings of the *Ramayana*, Ravana represents the embodiment of evil, his arrogance, his desire for power, and his defiance of dharma, marking him as the ultimate antagonist to Lord Rama, the righteous hero. However, Neelakantan's *Asura* challenges this simplification by presenting Ravana as a complex figure whose actions are driven by a combination of ambition, intellect, and a desire to resist a rigid social order. In doing so, Neelakantan critiques how mythology is used to justify social hierarchies and stifle dissent.

Neelakantan's Ravana is portrayed as an intellectual and a ruler with progressive ideas. He is a Brahmin by birth, but he defies the traditional caste hierarchy and gives space to people from all walks of life in his kingdom. Under Ravana's rule, Lanka is a place of innovation where scholars, scientists, and artisans thrive regardless of caste or background. This depiction starkly contrasts the kingdom of Ayodhya, ruled by the righteous but rigid Rama, whose kingdom, while morally exemplary, is steeped in social order and orthodoxy constraints. Ravana's vision of a more egalitarian society, though flawed in execution, critiques the conservatism that often accompanies modern visions of moral superiority and nationalistic identity.

The idea of modernity is central to Neelakantan's retelling. Modernity, at its core, is associated with the rise of rationalism, scientific inquiry, and the breaking down of hierarchical social structures. In *Asura*, Ravana embodies many aspects of modernity: his intellectual pursuits, his desire for technological advancement, and his challenge to the dominance of the gods. His character is presented as someone who seeks to overthrow the divine status quo and establish a rule based on merit rather than divine right or lineage. This is particularly significant in the Indian context, where the legacy of colonialism and the hierarchical caste system continues to inform discussions of modernity. Neelakantan's portrayal of Ravana's efforts to create a modern, progressive society challenges the dominant narratives that equate modernity with Westernization or the rejection of indigenous traditions.

The tension between myth and modernity in *Asura* is not merely intellectual but is deeply embedded in the novel's exploration of power and governance. Ravana's desire for knowledge and progress leads him to challenge the divine order and confront the gods themselves. His ambition is not born of a passion for domination but a belief in the transformative potential of reason and intellect. This intellectual rebellion against the gods, who represent an unchanging, transcendent order, positions Ravana as a figure of modernity who seeks to dismantle the traditional systems of power legitimized by religious myth.

Neelakantan does not present Ravana as a flawless hero of modernity. His kingdom, though progressive in some respects, is also rife with contradictions. Ravana's ambition eventually leads him to become increasingly authoritarian, and his intellectual arrogance prevents him from listening to the advice of his closest allies, including his wife, Mandodari. This shift from a visionary ruler to a tyrant mirrors the

trajectory of many revolutionary movements that, once in power, lose sight of their original ideals and become entangled in the systems they sought to dismantle. In this sense, Ravana's downfall is emblematic of modern societies' challenges when attempting to reconcile ideals of progress with the realities of power. Neelakantan suggests that when not grounded in humility and social responsibility, modernity can lead to a concentration of power that mirrors the oppression it sought to overthrow.

The novel also interrogates the moral complexity of Ravana's character, exploring the tension between personal ambition and public responsibility. Ravana's intellectual pursuits are undeniably modern in their focus on rationalism, knowledge, and technological advancement, yet his inability to balance these pursuits with moral responsibility leads to his downfall. His pride and desire for recognition prevent him from considering the broader social consequences of his actions. In this, Neelakantan critiques the modern obsession with individual achievement, suggesting that progress without ethical considerations is ultimately hollow. Ravana's story warns against unchecked ambition. This idea resonates with the contemporary Indian experience, where economic growth and technological development are often pursued without adequate attention to social justice or environmental sustainability.

A significant part of *Asura*'s critique of modernity lies in its portrayal of the gods, particularly the character of Vishnu. In the *Ramayana*, Vishnu embodies divine justice and righteousness. Still, in *Asura*, Neelakantan presents him as a figure who perpetuates the status quo, using his divine power to uphold an unequal social order. Vishnu's actions in the novel often appear self-serving, as he works to maintain the established order of things rather than seeking true justice or equality. In this sense, Neelakantan positions the gods as symbols of the traditional power structures that resist change and

innovation. This reimagining of the divine challenges the conventional understanding of myth as a source of moral authority and raises essential questions about the relationship between mythological narratives and the construction of modern political and social identities.

Neelakantan also uses the character of Bhadra, a low-caste figure, to explore how modernity affects marginalized communities. Bhadra's narrative is one of disillusionment and alienation. His journey mirrors that of many subaltern voices in modern India, who find themselves caught between the promises of modernity and the harsh realities of social exclusion. Bhadra's scepticism about the possibilities of social mobility and his growing disillusionment with Ravana's regime and Rama's idealized rule reflects the frustrations of those left behind by India's post-independence political and economic transformations. Neelakantan's portrayal of Bhadra underscores that modernity, for many, is not a liberating force but often reinforces existing social inequalities.

The question of caste is integral to *Asura*'s engagement with modernity. Ravana's meritocratic ideals directly oppose the rigid caste system that persists in both the ancient world of the *Ramayana* and modern India. While Ravana's rule is based on the idea that people should be judged by their abilities rather than their caste, his failure to fully dismantle these hierarchies exposes the limits of even the most progressive political projects. Neelakantan critiques how caste continues to shape social and economic life in modern India despite the country's legal framework promoting equality. The novel suggests that caste-based discrimination remains deeply ingrained in Indian society and that accurate modernity cannot be achieved without addressing these deeply entrenched social inequalities.

At a broader level, Neelakantan's *Asura* reflects the tensions inherent in modern India's struggle to reconcile its ancient cultural heritage with the demands of globalization and technological advancement. While some factions of modern India seek to assert a return to traditional values, others embrace Western-style modernization, often at the expense of Indigenous cultures and practices. Neelakantan suggests that these dichotomies are oversimplified; myth and modernity can coexist, but they must be understood as dynamic and evolving rather than static and fixed. In *Asura*, the tension between myth and modernity is not resolved but rather presented as an ongoing struggle that challenges readers to rethink how they understand progress, identity, and social justice in India's pluralistic society.

Ultimately, *Asura* is not just a retelling of an ancient myth; it is a critique of the way myths are used to shape modern identities. Through his revision of the *Ramayana*, Neelakantan invites readers to question the myths passed down through generations and engage with them critically. The novel offers a nuanced vision of modernity that recognizes power, identity, and social change complexities. It encourages readers to consider how the myths of the past can inform, but also challenge, the vision of the future.

Exploring Ravana's character in *Asura* offers a critical examination of the concept of "progress." While he is often demonized in traditional renditions of the *Ramayana*, Neelakantan's depiction invites readers to rethink the dichotomy of good versus evil about modernity. Ravana's commitment to knowledge and his attempt to build a modern, egalitarian society reflect the aspirations of contemporary India to shed the shackles of its colonial past and move toward a future based on meritocracy and intellectual freedom. Neelakantan shows that even well-meaning individuals with

progressive ideals can be consumed by their flaws, especially when power is involved. This dynamic mirrors modern India's paradox: a society that simultaneously strives for economic, technological, and social progress while contending with deep-rooted issues of inequality, corruption, and historical baggage.

One of the most poignant aspects of *Asura* is how the novel examines the relationship between individual agency and societal structures. Ravana's story is about an individual who rises to power by defying the limitations imposed by his social position. His rise from a low-caste Brahmin to the king of Lanka challenges traditional notions of hierarchy, presenting a figure who, despite his flaws, defies the norm and carves out space for others to rise above the constraints of birth and class. This vision of a more open society is part of the modernist aspiration many reformers and thinkers in India have championed. As Ravana's reign progresses, his inability to balance personal ambition with the responsibility of governance results in his ultimate downfall. This contradiction underscores the challenges inherent in the modern pursuit of progress: how can one ensure equality and merit are realized without falling prey to the corrupting forces of power? Neelakantan's critique suggests that modernity cannot be reduced to intellectualism or ambition; a commitment to ethical governance and social responsibility must accompany it.

In the Indian context, the questions posed by *Asura* resonate deeply with the struggles of postcolonial societies grappling with the remnants of imperial rule and the aspirations of modern nation-building. After gaining independence, India sought to assert its sovereignty by blending tradition and modernity. It sought to forge a new identity to honour its cultural heritage while embracing the benefits of industrialization, industrialization, education, and technological progress. However, as the novel

suggests, the path to modernization is tense through Ravana's failures. Modernity, as it is often understood, has been influenced heavily by Western ideals, leading some to question whether actual progress is possible without abandoning or radically transforming indigenous values.

Neelakantan's *Asura* highlights this cultural friction, drawing attention to how modernity in India is often shaped by external forces, whether through colonial rule, global capitalism, or Western-centric development models. The novel stresses the importance of reinterpreting and reimagining indigenous myths, rituals, and cultural symbols to construct a modern identity that is uniquely Indian. In doing so, *Asura* opens up a space for reconsidering how India can reconcile its diverse heritage with the demands of a globalized world. Through Ravana's progressive vision, the novel offers a hopeful yet cautious optimism about the potential for modernity to be reimagined on Indian terms without relinquishing the country's past entirely.

However, Ravana's failure also mirrors a broader critique of modernity. Neelakantan suggests that pursuing progress in technological development, political autonomy, or social reform can sometimes lead to unforeseen consequences. Just as Ravana's intellectual pursuits ultimately become tangled with his desire for power and his inability to maintain a balance between the head and the heart, modern India's efforts to reconcile rapid industrialization and economic growth with social justice have led to various contradictions. The country's transformation into a global economic power has been accompanied by vast inequalities, social unrest, and environmental degradation, all reflecting the limitations of a progress-oriented vision that does not adequately address ethical and social concerns.

The novel also presents a broader critique of the political systems that claim to embody modernity. Neelakantan positions the battle between Ravana and Rama as a metaphor for the political contestations between different visions of society. While Rama's idealism and adherence to dharma represent the vision of an ordered, hierarchical society, Ravana's vision of Lanka embodies the ideals of individual freedom, social mobility, and intellectual progress. This contrast between the two rulers reflects the ongoing tension in modern India between the aspirations for egalitarianism and liberty and the persistence of old forms of social control and authority. Neelakantan critiques both Ravana's tyranny and Rama's orthodoxy, suggesting that the real solution lies in reconciling the progressive ideals of modernity with the ethical demands of society.

The character of Bhadra serves as a crucial lens for examining the effects of modernity on marginalized groups. As a subaltern figure, Bhadra's experiences illustrate the alienation and disillusionment that come with the promises of social mobility and equality that modernity often offers but seldom delivers. His scepticism toward both Ravana's rule and Rama's ideals highlights the betrayal those excluded from the benefits of progress feel. Through Bhadra, Neelakantan underscores the complexities of modernity in India, where particular groups, particularly those from lower castes or marginalized communities, continue to struggle with systemic oppression despite the country's legal and political advances. Bhadra's character serves as a reminder that the path to modernity cannot simply be measured by economic indicators or technological development; it must also consider the lived experiences of those who remain excluded from the narrative of progress.

Furthermore, the mythological framework of *Asura* allows Neelakantan to explore how mythology functions as a tool of empowerment and oppression. Mythological narratives often validate social structures, cultural norms, and moral codes. However, Neelakantan's retelling shows that myths are not immutable; they can be reinterpreted, critiqued, and reshaped to reflect contemporary concerns. Through Ravana's character, Neelakantan demonstrates how myth can subvert existing power structures, offering an alternative vision of society that challenges the status quo. This is particularly significant in modern India, where myth and history are often invoked in political discourse to justify national ideologies and social policies.

It becomes clear that the novel's central preoccupation is with the idea of justice. In the traditional *Ramayana*, justice is often depicted as a divine mandate enforced by the gods. However, Neelakantan's *Asura* offers a more complex, human-centred exploration of justice that is not dictated by divine will but emerges through personal struggle and political agency. Ravana's quest for justice is rooted in his intellectualism, belief in rational governance, and refusal to accept a system that privileges divine right over human agency. This desire for justice, however, is complicated by his increasing authoritarianism and inability to temper his passions with the needs of his people. *Asura* suggests that modern notions of justice cannot be equated with legalistic or divine mandates; instead, justice must emerge from a nuanced understanding of the relationship between the individual and society.

Ravana's rule over Lanka is predicated on his idea of justice as fairness and his efforts to break down the caste system and create a society where people are judged by their merit rather than their birth. This vision of a just society resonates deeply with modern democratic ideals, which emphasize equality, individual rights, and the

opportunity for upward mobility. However, Neelakantan critiques the idealism of Ravana's vision by demonstrating how, despite his best intentions, the very power structures Ravana seeks to dismantle inevitably entrench themselves. Ravana's failure to create a truly egalitarian society is a reminder that even the most progressive ideologies are susceptible to corruption when power is concentrated in the hands of a few. Through this, *Asura* explores a key paradox of modernity. While modern ideals may promise justice and equality, they are often undermined by the same systems of power they seek to dismantle.

Neelakantan's portrayal of Ravana's intellectual and philosophical development also points to the limits of individualism in modern society. Ravana's scholarly pursuits, his study of Vedic texts, his mastery of various sciences, and his construction of a technologically advanced empire indicate a rationalist vision of modernity. However, Neelakantan critiques this vision by highlighting Ravana's inability to recognize the importance of collective well-being over individual greatness. Ravana's increasing hubris and obsession with his intellectual superiority lead him to disregard the counsel of others, including his most trusted advisors. His refusal to listen to Mandodari and others who warn him about the dangers of his growing tyranny ultimately leads to his downfall. This reflects a broader critique of modernity, where the celebration of individualism and intellectual achievement can lead to the neglect of ethical concerns and the welfare of others.

Neelakantan's *Asura* becomes a powerful critique of the Enlightenment ideals that underpin many modern political systems. The emphasis on reason, progress, and individual freedom is questioned through the figure of Ravana, who embodies these ideals but ultimately becomes a victim of his own intellectual arrogance and unchecked

ambition. Neelakantan's critique suggests that while rooted in ideals of justice, equality, and rationality, modernity can also give rise to new forms of authoritarianism, exploitation, and alienation when these ideals are not grounded in social responsibility and empathy.

The tension between myth and modernity is evident in how Neelakantan uses the *Ramayana* to mirror contemporary Indian society. In the novel, the traditional gods, particularly Vishnu, are portrayed as protectors of the established social order, representing the forces that resist change and innovation. While Vishnu, as Rama, is often portrayed as the epitome of dharma, in *Asura*, he describes the entrenched power structures that maintain the status quo. His role as the defender of the traditional order is contrasted with Ravana's vision of a society based on reason, equality, and intellectual freedom. This dichotomy between the two figures highlights the central tension in modern India, where the forces of tradition and progress constantly conflict.

The gods in *Asura* are not presented as omnipotent or inherently just; instead, they are depicted as self-serving and often indifferent to the struggles of ordinary people. This reimagining of the divine undermines the traditional understanding of myth as a moral guide, suggesting that mythology is a tool used by those in power to justify their positions. Vishnu, in *Asura*, is shown to be complicit in maintaining an unjust social order, highlighting how religious and political ideologies are often intertwined. This critique of the gods as enforcers of the status quo reflects a broader scepticism toward using religion and mythology in legitimizing authority. Neelakantan's *Asura* ultimately calls for a reexamination of how myths are employed in contemporary society to reinforce existing power structures and limit the possibilities for social change.

Moreover, Neelakantan's novel interrogates cultural identity in the context of modernity. As India continues to navigate its postcolonial identity, the tension between maintaining traditional values and embracing modernity becomes a central question. *Neelakantan* uses Ravana's character to explore the complexities of this struggle. Ravana's vision of Lanka as a progressive, intellectual society is rooted in his understanding of ancient Indian knowledge systems; his failure to embrace the collective aspects of society ultimately leads to his downfall. This tension between individual achievement and collective well-being is a central issue for modern India, where rapid economic growth and technological advancement have often been pursued without adequate attention to social inequality or environmental concerns. Through Ravana's story, Neelakantan asks to consider how modernity, in its rush to embrace progress, can overlook the importance of communal values and ethical responsibility.

In *Asura*, the character of Bhadra represents the voice of the marginalized, offering a critique of how modernity often excludes those already disenfranchised. Bhadra's alienation from Ravana's rule and the idealized morality of Rama highlights the deep divisions within society, frequently overlooked in discussions of progress and modernity. Bhadra's disillusionment reflects the frustrations of many in contemporary India who feel that the promises of modernity, whether in economic development or social equality, have not been realized for them. This sense of exclusion is not only a political issue but a deeply personal one, as it highlights the psychological and emotional toll of living in a society where opportunities are often denied based on caste, class, or gender.

Neelakantan's *Asura* ultimately presents a vision of modernity that is both hopeful and cautionary. The novel emphasizes the importance of critical engagement with the

past, suggesting that the myths and narratives that shape our understanding of the world must be reexamined and reinterpreted in light of contemporary concerns. While *Asura* critiques Ravana's failure to realize his vision of a just society fully, it also critiques the forces of tradition and orthodoxy that continue to dominate Indian society. By reimagining the *Ramayana* through Ravana's perspective, Neelakantan invites readers to reflect on how myth and modernity intersect and how the ideals of progress and justice can be reconciled with the complex realities of power, identity, and social change.

As *Asura* progresses, it becomes evident that Neelakantan's reimagining of Ravana's character is not just a revision of myth but a profound commentary on the complexities of modern Indian identity. The portrayal of Ravana as a visionary ruler who seeks to overturn centuries of hierarchical social structures raises questions about the very nature of progress. Modernity, as depicted in *Asura*, is not an inherent or linear path towards improvement but is fraught with contradictions. Ravana's ambition to create a society based on merit, knowledge, and intellectual freedom was revolutionary in ancient Lanka. Yet, the human limitations of power, ego, and unchecked ambition thwart it. His failure becomes a cautionary tale for modern India, which faces the paradox of attempting to reconcile the demands of globalization with the aspirations of social justice and equality.

The key to understanding Ravana's tragic downfall lies in his inability to govern with empathy. While his rule promises intellectual and social progress, his authoritarian approach undermines the inclusivity and egalitarianism he seeks to achieve. Neelakantan critiques this tension between idealism and governance by emphasizing how Ravana's success as an intellectual figure clashes with his inability to embrace the

broader ethical considerations required for effective leadership. His obsession with expanding his intellectual prowess and power causes him to lose touch with the realities of governance, particularly in a society that requires a balance of power and compassion. This juxtaposition of intellectual achievement with moral failure reflects modern India's struggle with the balance between technological advancement, economic growth, and the well-being of its citizens.

In modern Indian politics, similar tensions between progress and responsibility can be observed. Rapid industrialization, for example, has led to impressive economic growth. Yet, this growth has been accompanied by significant challenges, including widening income inequality, environmental degradation, and the persistence of caste-based discrimination. Much like Ravana, modern India often finds itself at a crossroads between achieving material success and addressing the fundamental social and ethical concerns that underpin the notion of a just society. The lessons of Ravana's reign serve as a poignant reminder that progress must not come at the expense of ethical considerations and that modernity, as it is often conceived, cannot be an uncritical embrace of Western development ideals.

The character of Bhadra, a member of the marginalized community in *Asura*, plays a pivotal role in this critique of modernity. His journey through the novel is a counterpoint to the narrative of progress that Ravana attempts to build. Bhadra's story reflects many's disillusionment in modern societies, where promises of equality and opportunity often fall short of being realized. His sense of alienation is not only a personal struggle but a broader commentary on how the narratives of progress, whether in economic policies or political ideologies, often fail to account for the lived realities of those who remain at the periphery of society. Neelakantan's treatment of Bhadra's

character suggests that modernity cannot be measured solely in economic growth or technological development; actual progress must also address the deep-seated issues of exclusion, exploitation, and inequality.

Bhadra's relationship with Ravana is particularly revealing in this regard. While Ravana's policies are ostensibly designed to uplift people like Bhadra, they are undermined by Ravana's failure to listen to those affected by his rule. This dynamic mirrors the often top-down approach to governance in modern societies, where elites or technocrats make decisions without adequate consultation with the people who these decisions will most impact. In the case of modern India, this is seen in the political and economic policies prioritizing industrial growth and globalization at the expense of the rural poor, marginalized communities, and the environment. Bhadra's scepticism toward both Ravana's ideals and the religious orthodoxy embodied by Rama highlights the alienation of subaltern groups from the mainstream narrative of progress.

In *Asura*, Neelakantan also critiques how myths become vehicles for political and ideological manipulation. In its traditional form, the Ramayana has often been used to justify the hierarchical caste system and the ideal of the hero as a paragon of virtue and righteousness. Through Ravana, Neelakantan reveals the fluidity of myths and the possibility of alternative interpretations. Ravana's retelling of the events of the *Ramayana* challenges the traditional heroism of Rama, suggesting that the concepts of virtue and dharma are not absolute but are often constructed to serve the interests of those in power. This reimagining of the myth critiques how narratives of good and evil have been used to justify power structures in India and the broader world. Neelakantan encourages readers to reconsider mythology's role in reinforcing dominant cultural and political ideologies by questioning the sanctity of the traditional Ramayana.

The interplay between myth and modernity in *Asura* also touches on the role of religious identity in shaping the contours of modern Indian society. The resurgence of religious nationalism in contemporary India has often invoked mythological symbols, particularly from the *Ramayana*, to promote a vision of society rooted in religious orthodoxy. *Asura*, however, offers a subversive reading of these myths, suggesting that religious identity, while important, should not be used as a tool for exclusion or domination. Ravana's devotion to knowledge and refusal to adhere to traditional religious hierarchies challenge the rigid boundaries that religious ideologies often impose on society. Neelakantan's critique suggests that modernity should not be defined by an adherence to religious orthodoxy but by an openness to diverse forms of knowledge, intellectual freedom, and social progress.

Through Ravana's complex character, Neelakantan also reflects on the limitations of idealism in politics and governance. While admirable, Ravana's vision of an egalitarian society is ultimately hindered by his failure to recognize the importance of compromise and collective decision-making. His obsession with power and his refusal to adapt to the realities of governance result in a society that, while technologically advanced, remains deeply flawed. This failure is a cautionary tale for modern India, where political leaders often promise grand visions of progress without fully considering the practicalities of governance or the complexities of implementing social change. In this sense, *Asura* highlights the dangers of unchecked ambition and the importance of humility, self-reflection, and empathy in pursuing modernity.

The Story of Ravana and His People, as its title implies, is a unique piece of narrative that describes the plot of Ramayana from the perspective of Ravana and Bhadra; one an Asura Emperor and the other a menial, downtrodden Asura who helped

Ravana to ascend the throne of Lanka. The tale takes a fresh look at the story of Rama and Ravana from a different angle. Anand Neelakantan's new version of Ramayana is not a story of Gods but of human beings who exist in the brutal caste consciousness where the Aryans, with their fair skin and their notions of superiority, dominate the Dravidians. The Brahminical notions of the Vedas and their exploitation of the lower caste become the domineering theme in the tale. Rama becomes instrumental in these ideas of attaining Godhood. The Asura notions are righteous at some or many points in the novel.

The novel *Asura* is a possible narrative of the real myth Ramayana, which offers reason for Ravana's deeds and provides justification from his and his people's points of view. But in between the novel, Ravana, by himself and Bhadra, is described as an ambitious and proud King who never cares for the will of his people. Ramayana, a story with infinite multidimensional possibilities, has now narrowed to a single perspective and is subverted here. Sita becomes Ravana's daughter here, the actual cause of his men's destruction. Siva, Vishnu and Brahma are no longer Gods but mass leaders who achieved a kind of Godhood. The Devas and the Asuras cause societal changes when they overrun and attack the others' kingdoms. *Asura* is a tale of the rise and fall of the Asura Empire under the rule of Ravana.

The novel becomes unique through its narrative style and representation of the mythical characters as it rephrases the version of Rama, Ravana, Sita, Mandodari, Bhadra, Soorpanaka and several other known and unnoticed characters. The novel seems realistic when the characters attain roles as usual: ordinary, ambitious human beings who strive for their existence. The novel's author provides logical and justifiable reasons with comprehensive human potential. Hence, the narrative strategy should be

appreciated. Narratology, which deals with the properties, style, weaving pattern, authorial stands, verbal evidence, perspectives, voices, standards, notions, etc, of narratives, illuminates the discussion of the text in various topics and contexts.

Narration is a process that started from time immemorial, but its wide application and exploration of different possibilities make each text of literature unique.

The Washerman, who has no voice but is the leading factor for Rama's rejection of Sita in the Ramayana, is given a strong voice, a name and an influential role in Neelakantan's *Asura*. This is a valid example of a possible narration with an unnoticed man emerging as a narrator in the grand narrative. The multidimensional aspects of a single narrative are immense. Narratives that provide different perspectives by different persons from various points of view may cause dramatic changes in their source in the grand narrative.

No one can claim their narration to be the right one, and the only existing truth as truth varies according to context. There comes a fiction's rational, logical, possible and plausible existence. Here, in *Asura*, when Sita becomes Ravana's daughter, the Asura Emperor can have ample reasons for his action to regain his daughter. The irony comes when the daughter is ignorant about her origins, and no one, including her father, dares to tell her the truth. The humane aspects leading to the thoughts, deeds, etc, can be overwhelmingly seen in the work. It never glorifies any characters, even the narrators.

The narrative in *Asura* covers the entire life of Ravana, Bhadra and Sita, while Rama, Mandodari and other secondary characters are portrayed only as the primary characters' lives. The plot begins with Ravana's death scene and develops as a flashback to his life from childhood to deathbed. The other narrator, Bhadra, who at first supports Ravana's narration, later acquires his voice as the promoter of the story. The reader can

see different people associated with them between these narrations. Marginalized characters also appear in fiction. The voices of the other characters are unheard, but they reflect the minds of those characters according to Ravana and Bhadra's views. Sita, Mandodari, Mala, Soorpanaka, Arasi, and Ravana's Mother are some female characters who have not directly heard voices in the fiction.

Though the female characters have no direct representation in the novel, their mindset, behaviour, character, etc., are projected through the voices of Ravana and Bhadra to various extents. Their unarticulated voice is heard through the articulated voices of the narrators. These articulations may deconstruct the myths. Women like Sita, Mandodari, et al. emphasize purity, devotion and self-respect, while Mala acts as the liberated one. All of the female characters have almost the same fate. They are at the threshold to speak, but their condition becomes more and more pathetic as society pays no concern to their wish, as in the case of Sita, the epitome of sacrifice and selfless devotion to her husband.

The ultimate narrator is the author himself. In the narration of Asura, there are instances where the author's unconsciousness regarding the real mythical story works. This exemplifies the grand narrative's influence, which remains a source for the metanarratives in the others. There, the worthiness of the narrative is questioned, but the entire narrative can be seen as a possible explanation of a myth from the perspective of Ravana, a vanquished. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the two epics that united India even when the country was geographically divided into several small kingdoms. The Ramayana has been more popular for ritual reading, but Mahabharata raises questions on the nature of morality that remain provocative even today.

When Indian literature owes much to the great epic Ramayana and Mahabharata, there is a random adherence to exploring these myths and grand narratives. The increased admiration to explain in detail the narrative structures and follow the same plot pattern, etc., is now outwitted by the possible narratives to the single grand narrative. Such possible exploration shows how a ritualistic text like the Ramayana, or any Epic or mythological framework, is subverted. But since *Asura: Tale Of The Vanquished* never attempts to counter the real text completely, it won't be able to claim the text as a purely deconstructive one. The text offers us another perspective of the Ramayana myth. At times, it tries to fill the gaps in the narratives, construct new frameworks and implement new fictionalities to make the text sensible.

Literature never showed any reluctance to approve such narratives, which offered an alternative to some other existing ones. For Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a work of art is a product of human activity. Learn and pursue by others. According to Polkinghorne, any such human activity, for example, a narrative, is the construction of complex relationships in narrative structures^l. Narratives often provide us with the fundamental epistemological structures that help us to make sense of the confusing diversity and multiplicity of events and to produce explanatory patterns for them. Through the narratives, the world and its history are recorded and developed. For the narratologists, The significance of narrative in human culture can be seen from the fact that written cultures seek their origins in myths, which they then record for posterity.

The Indian Epic, the Ramayana, is sometimes considered a myth that shows the cultural, social and private life of a society people that is recorded for posterity. It dates back to 1500 BCE, according to certain scholars. Recent studies have brought it down to about the fourth century BCE. However, all dates in this regard can only be speculative, and the latter does not diminish the intrinsic value of the great epic. It was

composed by Valmiki in the classical language of India- Sanskrit. He composed the whole work, running to twenty-four thousand stanzas, in a state of pure inspiration, as we believe. The Ramayana pervades our cultural life in one form or another at all times; it may be as a scholarly discourse at a public hall, a traditional storyteller's narrative in an open space, or a play or dance drama on stage.

The modern literary artists in India, such as Amish Tripathy, Ashok Banker, Anuja Chandramouli et al., made serious efforts to modify and picture the tale in their way and style. Apart from these works, which favoured Rama's deeds, *Asura*, by Anand Neelakantan, stays aloof since it is a tale that restructured the entire perspectives of Ramayana and narrated it through the point of view of Ravana the supreme anti-hero in Ramayana and Bhadra- a menial character who caused the whole sufferings of Sita. Here, too, Bhadra is the initiator of Ravana's fate. Every narration is based on cause-and-effect relations. *Asura* is narrated by Ravana and Bhadra, who analyze the same intentions. Ravana tells the tale from his deathbed in the Warfield.

The narrator then leads us to his childhood and his entire life. In between, there comes Bhadra, who also expresses his world in association with Ravana. Thus, we come across the possible world of narratives. The novel revolves around these two first- person narrators' perspectives, justifications, reasons, logic, thoughts, etc. Ravana, the emperor, is the right choice to narrate the story. His version of Ramayana is different and made plausible by the author. But many doubted Bhadra's intervention. The sole reason is that Bhadra, the menial, downtrodden Asura, the washer man in the great epic Ramayana who precipitated the mystery of Sita and Rama, appears in *Asura* with a higher role. He follows Ravana, witnesses his glory and defeat, accompanies him, and suffers for him. Still, at times, he is forgotten by the emperor but lives longer than Ravana and sees what happens to his people - the vanquished and the victor- Rama.

Ravana's narrative takes us to a new fictional world, which, for instance, resembles Ramayana. It follows the anti-hero's version. Neelakantan implemented his imaginative faculty to make justifications for his hero, Ravana. So Ravana's deeds and he *struggled* to uplift his people and to regain his daughter Sita from the hands of Devas, who never show respect to women. That justifies his deed. At the same time, by himself and through Bhadra's views, Ravana's authentic self, which prioritized himself, his pride, his wishes, etc., is revealed. But I was a dreamer. And I did not want to get along in this world. I wanted to own it. Thus, in every sense, *Asura: Tale Of The Vanquished* offers a narrative that can be taken as a paratext with Ramayana. More than a paratext, *Asura* is another possible narration or an alternative reading of the Ramayana myth. It offers another interpretation and a choice to look at an event differently. Fludernik explains this as:

The story is then that which the narrative discourse reports represents or signifies. These distinctions enable us, for example, to account for the fact that the same story can be presented in various guises. Thus, different narratives focus on different aspects of the story; more precisely, the stories we reconstruct from different narrative texts often complement each other. Using parody or reflecting on current issues and concerns, they fill the gaps that earlier versions of the same story left in their presentation or rewrite the story.

This is true with *Asura*, the author, who intended to rewrite the story with a new perspective that was unknown or kept unspoken. The available translations of Valmiki's and Kamba's Ramayana-Ramavataram generate this doubt about whether some instances or topics discussed in *Asura* were a matter of discussion once. In the text, there is a question about Sita's parentage or the reason behind Ravana's abduction of Sita. Sita is said to have been discovered in a ploughed field and, for that reason, is

regarded as the daughter of Bhumi Devi. Sita is also seen as an incarnation of Vedavati, whom Ravana tried to molest. Here in Asura, Vedavati becomes his beloved, but she commits suicide because of Bhadra and other asuras. But at that time, Sita was there with Bhadra, and he kept her safe and never killed her. For the same reason, Bhadra regresses and repents when the prophecy about her comes true.

There is a part in Kamba's Ramayana where Soorpanaka tries to seduce Rama by the name of Karnavalli in Dhandaka forest. Meanwhile, she sees Sita and argues to Rama that she is a rakshasa woman. Karnavalli said to Rama very seriously, Great one! Don't let this creature come near you. Don't be misled by her appearance; it's not her own; she has assumed it through black art. She is a rakshasa woman; drive her off before she does you any harm. This provided a glimpse of the idea for the author of Asura to portray Sita as the daughter of the demon emperor Ravana.

Asura never shifts much away from the actual incidents. Ravana's Brahminical lineage from his father Sage Visrava, his demonic inheritance from his mother Kaikasi and the blood relation with Kubera, the futile wars with Devas, friendship with Bali, acquiring Rama's rage, etc are followed by the author. But how then it becomes another narratological presentation is the question. The answer is that the novel favours Ravana and allows the readers to think from another point of view other than glorifying Rama. The foremost thing to note is that the book presents a world and a set of more human characters than Gods. Ravana himself wanted to be known as a man. A complete man is the epitome of a whole human being. He is as good or bad as any human being, and society cannot curb his other nine faces. So Rama may be seen as God, but Ravana is the more complete man.

According to narrative theorists, a narrative requires a human or human-like (anthropomorphic) protagonist at the centre. So here in *Asura*, the idea fits as it has portrayed the characters in their human form. It is agreed among narratologists that authentic narratives have human protagonists or anthropomorphic characters. Ravana initially describes feelings and ambitions from a teenager's point of view and then further describes the problems of handling an entire empire from a ruler's point of view. At the same time, Bhadra describes everything from an ordinary person's point of view or, rather, from a poor person's perspective. The author, since the beginning, tries to foreground the entire plot into the system of hierarchy based on caste. As a narrator, Ravana explains the age-old enmity between their race (*Asura*) and *Devas*.

The history of South India, the civilizations, etc., are mentioned. The novel seeks the genealogy of mythical characters like Mahabali, Indra and even the Gods described here as human forms and later labelled as Gods. Thus, Neelakantan uses every logical argument to prove his fiction as more serious, applicable and appreciable. Human beings are prone to be inspired by characters with certain extraordinary qualities. At the same time, anyone who does not live is the one who is withered according to his wishes. This notion is subverted in *Asura* by Anand Neelakantan, who portrays Rama and Ravana as human beings possessing no superhuman powers but as mere participants in the caste-dominated society.

Asura, Anand Neelakantan's debut novel, is a possible reworking of the great Indian epic *Ramayana*. The book offers to go through the mindset of different characters, especially the silenced one in the *Ramayana*. The novel is the tale of Ravana and his people, who are the vanquished. The author implements certain fictionalities and narrative imagination to mould the storyline from the perspectives of Ravana and

Bhadra. Through the narrators, Neelakantan recreates the myth with a different, may be an alternative reading for Ramayana.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Asura: The Tale of the Vanquished by Anand Neelakantan is a fascinating and complex examination of how myth and modernity interact in India. The novel offers a critical and introspective picture of modernity through the character of Ravana, dissecting the conventional Ramayana story. By portraying Ravana as a complex and misunderstood man whose ambition for a just society is hampered by his weaknesses, ego, and the same institutions of power he tries to transform, Neelakantan questions the conventional view of heroes and villains. Readers are urged to engage with classic narratives more critically by this revisionist retelling, which challenges them to reevaluate how myth shapes political views and cultural ideals.

The story examines the conflicts that arise in modernity between idealism and governance, individualism and group responsibility, and progress and tradition. The aspirations of modernity are reflected in Ravana's expansive vision for Lanka, which is based on merit, intellectual freedom, and fairness. However, his inability to strike a balance between these principles and compassion and pragmatic leadership emphasizes how difficult it is for contemporary nations to achieve social justice and equality. Neelakantan's depiction of Ravana's demise warns against the perils of unbridled authority, conceit, and disregarding morality in the name of advancement.

Furthermore, through characters like Bhadra, who stand in for the disaffected and disillusioned, *Asura* critically views how voices are marginalized in society. His alienation highlights the shortcomings of both traditional and contemporary systems in meeting the demands of the oppressed, implying that meaningful change cannot be

made without an inclusive strategy that considers every individual's lived circumstances. The novel advocates for modernity based on intellectual freedom, empathy, and social responsibility in opposition to the growing tendency of religious nationalism in contemporary India. It criticizes religious orthodoxy and calls for a more inclusive vision of knowledge and governance.

Using myth as a prism to comprehend current social issues, *Asura* ultimately examines the benefits and drawbacks of modernity in India. Neelakantan challenges readers to consider the nature of development, the limits of idealism, and the necessity of a more just and equal society by reinterpreting the Ramayana and offering a more nuanced and compassionate portrayal of Ravana. The book is a powerful reminder that modernity is not a panacea and that social progress involves critical introspection, receptivity to many viewpoints, and a dedication to everyone's welfare.

Asura provides a novel viewpoint on India's transition to modernity by exploring justice, power, and mythology issues. It challenges readers to reconsider the myths that have influenced their past and the future they hope to build. It reflects on the conflicts between tradition and progress, reason and power, and fairness and oppression, offering a fundamental critique of modernity's ideals. Neelakantan challenges the conventional division of good and evil by recasting Ravana as a visionary but fallible king, allowing readers to consider the difficulties of morality, leadership, and power.

Instead of portraying Ravana as a one-dimensional monster, the book shows him as a man of enormous desire and intellectual capacity whose dreams for a good society are undermined by his shortcomings and the inconsistencies in the structures he is trying to change. *Asura* poses important queries concerning modernity in general with this nuanced representation. The book examines how contemporary political systems

frequently uphold the same hierarchies of power and exclusion that they purport to oppose despite their claims of equality and development. The difficulties contemporary India faces in balancing its goals for social fairness with the realities of administration are symbolized by Ravana's abortive attempt to establish a meritocratic society.

The narrative also examines the connection between intellectualism and government while analyzing Ravana's dominion. Ravana embodies a contemporary ideal of leadership grounded in reason and enlightenment because of his commitment to knowledge and desire to establish a just and rational society. The limitations of intellectualism when it is not restrained by humility and empathy are shown in his incapacity to listen to others, arrogance, and increasing authoritarianism. Neelakantan draws attention to the peril of leadership that prioritizes academic superiority and personal power. This issue strikes a deep chord in the context of contemporary political leadership when corruption and the marginalization of the voices of the underprivileged are frequently the results of concentrating power in the hands of a select few.

In this sense, *Asura* also functions as a warning against the perils of idealism that is not based in reality. Though theoretically tempting, Ravana's vision of an egalitarian, technologically superior society ultimately fails to solve the moral and ethical issues of governing, which finally brings him to ruin. This is similar to what happened in contemporary India, where ambitious plans for economic growth and advancement have frequently been followed without considering the social sacrifices involved. Therefore, the book challenges readers to assess the promises of modernity critically and understand that advancement cannot come at the price of moral obligation or social inclusion.

Additionally, the novel's depiction of marginalized characters, Bhadra, highlights Ravana's shortcomings and modernity's inability to meet the needs of people frequently

left behind. Many people in modern-day India, especially those from lower castes or marginalized communities, whose voices are regularly stifled in political and economic discourse, can relate to Bhadra's alienation. A more inclusive modernity that acknowledges the significance of social justice, empathy, and a more equitable allocation of opportunities and resources is demanded by Neelakantan's critique of the social structures that sustain inequality. According to Neelakantan, myths are a vital component of cultural identity but shouldn't be used to further specific political goals or defend the existing quo.

When considering the broader ramifications of *Asura*, it is evident that Neelakantan is not just rehashing old stories but delving further into how myths influence contemporary identities and how narrative shapes our perceptions of the past and the present. The novel challenges readers to reevaluate how the fundamental myths that shape their worldview might be recast to address modern difficulties by providing an alternate interpretation of the Ramayana. By doing this, *Asura* transforms into a contemplation on the possibility that legendary stories could impact contemporary India's future in addition to being a critical analysis of the past.

Ultimately, *Asura* serves as a potent reminder that the path to modernity is neither straight-line nor one-dimensional. Readers are prompted to consider the intricacies of this journey, the difficulties in striking a balance between social fairness and growth, the conflict between intellectualism and moral leadership, and the part myths play in forming national identity in Neelakantan's book. *Asura* is a deep, provocative examination of myth, modernity, and the potential for social transformation through its nuanced depiction of Ravana and its condemnation of the power structures that rule ancient and contemporary society. It demands a more complex and all-encompassing

view of modernity firmly anchored in equality, empathy, and justice. It acknowledges that critical engagement with the past and present is necessary to build a better future.

Asura significantly contributes to the current conversation about development, identity, and power in modern India by challenging the boundaries of modernity and examining the ways in which myths may be both freeing and repressive. It encourages readers to reflect critically on the myths that influence their perception of the world and how they may be reframed to promote a society that is more inclusive, egalitarian, and just. The ongoing significance of mythical stories in the present is highlighted by Neelakantan's *Asura*, which also shows how these old tales are rewritten and altered to speak to current issues.

The book forces us to reevaluate the conventional hero-villain division in the Ramayana as it explores the complexities of Ravana's mind and the destruction of his empire. Ravana, typically seen as a representation of evil, is a tragic hero whose good intentions are ultimately undermined by his poor performance. Modernity's dissatisfaction with the romanticized, oversimplified myths of progress that frequently ignore the complexity and tensions of societal development is symbolized by this departure from the traditional depiction of Ravana.

Neelakantan challenges readers to consider the boundaries of idealism and the challenges of real progress by presenting Ravana as a complex figure, especially in civilizations that have historically been rooted in hierarchical hierarchies.

The contemporary reading of Ravana's persona challenges the linear, unthinking conception of modernity. Modernization in India's post-colonial environment has typically been associated with adopting Western governance, technology, and economic development concepts. *Asura* demonstrates, however, that such advancements do not

always result in a just society or guarantee that the lives of underprivileged populations will improve.

Ravana's failure to establish a meritocratic society despite his strong moral and intellectual beliefs shows the fundamental reality that modernization processes, whether political, economic, or cultural, are rife with difficulties and inconsistencies. This critique is particularly pertinent in contemporary India, where many underprivileged populations have yet to experience the promises of growth and wealth fully.

The novel's depiction of Bhadra, a figure representing the marginalized groups in society, is among its most striking features. His disenchantment and doubt of Ravana's utopian vision reflect the dissatisfaction that many Indians in the modern era have with the government's claims of advancement. Bhadra's voyage perfectly captures the disappointment that results from political institutions' inability to fulfil their promises, especially when people in positions of authority disregard the needs of the underprivileged.

The top-down method of administration, in which elites make political decisions without fully comprehending or addressing the daily circumstances of the oppressed, is criticized by Neelakantan through Bhadra's character. In contemporary cultures, when the promises of modernity are frequently unmet for people at the bottom of the social scale, this reflects the larger divide between policymakers and the excluded.

Another primary focus of the book is how religion and mythology have shaped contemporary India's political environment. Through the Ramayana as a particular lens, Neelakantan criticizes the instrumentalization of religion for political ends. Many political and religious parties have utilized the classic Ramayana story to defend their positions of authority, frequently upholding conservative social norms and hierarchies. However, in *Asura*, the more straightforward, hegemonic religious doctrines propagated

by characters like Rama are contrasted with Ravana's knowledge-based and self-discipline-based spiritual views. Neelakantan provides a more nuanced interpretation of Ravana's personality, challenging the idea that religious identity should be utilized for exclusion, control, and separation. Instead, he promotes a more complex, diverse view of religion that honours social inclusion and intellectual freedom.

Asura considers the construction and manipulation of religious and cultural narratives within the framework of modernity in this way. In addition to reclaiming a platform for underrepresented voices, Neelakantan's reworking of the Ramayana offers a call to reconsider how myths and customs could be modified to represent the reality of modern society better. According to the book, myths are dynamic, ever-changing tales that can be effective instruments for social change when reinterpreted to question rather than uphold the status quo. When analyzing the importance of Asura's mythological reinterpretation, it becomes evident that the book is part of a larger discussion about how mythology shapes contemporary identities rather than just an attempt to rewrite old texts.

Mythology and political and cultural identity have long been entwined in India. Mythological tales have been utilized to uphold and defend particular social ideologies, from the Ram Rajya to the emergence of Hindu nationalism. Asura by Neelakantan challenges these hegemonic narratives by arguing that myths are dynamic and malleable, able to be changed to suit the changing demands of society rather than being static, unchanging, and meaningless. By offering a different viewpoint on Ravana, the book challenges readers to think critically about the myths that have influenced their cultural awareness and to consider the morals and beliefs they uphold.

As we return to the central tension between myth and modernity, *Asura* offers a powerful reflection on the complexities of social transformation. The novel's portrayal of Ravana's rise and fall mirrors the journey of modern India itself, caught between the forces of tradition and progress, between the ideal of a more just society and the harsh realities of political and social life. Through the lens of Ravana's vision, Neelakantan reminds readers that modernity is not a simple linear trajectory toward betterment but rather a series of complex and sometimes contradictory choices. Just as Ravana's ambitious projects were marred by his inability to address his rule's social and moral underpinnings, modern India's pursuit of progress continues to be marked by its struggle to reconcile economic development with social justice.

Ultimately, *Asura* serves as both a reflection on India's past and a challenge to its present. Neelakantan's retelling of the *Ramayana* provides a lens to critically examine modern India's political, social, and cultural dimensions. Through Ravana's character, the novel explores the costs of unchecked ambition, the limits of intellectualism, and the dangers of an idealized vision of progress that fails to account for the complexities of real-world governance. In this way, *Asura* is not only a reimagining of myth but also a profound meditation on the nature of modernity itself, its promises, its failures, and its potential for transformation.

By the novel's conclusion, it is clear that modernity in India, much like Ravana's reign, remains unfinished, complex, and fraught with contradictions. Neelakantan's *Asura* encourages readers to critically engage with the challenges of modernity, urging them to reconsider the myths they hold dear and actively work towards a more inclusive, just, and equitable future. Through its retelling of an ancient myth, *Asura* provides a rich, insightful commentary on the struggles that define modern India and

the ongoing quest for a society that lives up to the ideals of justice, equality, and social harmony.

The Tale of the Vanquished provides a powerful reimagining of Ravana, transforming him from a mere villain of the *Ramayana* into a multidimensional and "complete man." Ravana, as portrayed in the novel, is a man of remarkable intellect, deep spirituality, moral complexity, and profound leadership potential, whose flaws and contradictions contribute to his tragic downfall. Neelakantan challenges the traditional narrative by humanizing Ravana. This allows readers to reconsider mythology's conventional dichotomy of good versus evil and explore the nuanced realities of human ambition, intellect, and power.

Through Ravana's character, Neelakantan critiques the notion of leadership, presenting a figure whose intellectual brilliance is overshadowed by his inability to balance ambition with ethical responsibility and social inclusion. While admirable, Ravana's vision for Lanka as a meritocratic society driven by knowledge and intellectual growth ultimately proves insufficient in addressing the complex dynamics of governance, social justice, and the realities of human relationships. His tragic flaws, pride, arrogance, and inability to listen to others are poignant reminders of the dangers of unchecked ambition and the limitations of idealism when disconnected from practical considerations.

The novel also presents Ravana as a figure of modernity, embodying the tensions between traditional cultural values and the demands of progress and intellectual freedom. His story reflects the complexities of modern life, where even the most visionary leaders can fall victim to their flaws, societal divisions, and the failure to recognize the multifaceted nature of human existence. Ravana's intellectual and

spiritual journey, marked by his devotion to Shiva and pursuit of knowledge, underscores the complexity of modernity, a quest for progress that must be balanced with ethical responsibility, inclusivity, and humility.

Ultimately, *Asura* presents Ravana not as a one-dimensional villain but as a tragic hero whose strengths and weaknesses are emblematic of the human condition. His story is a timeless reminder of the importance of self-awareness, moral integrity, and recognizing the complexities of leadership and governance. Neelakantan's Ravana is a "complete man" because he embodies the full spectrum of human potential, from intellectual greatness to personal flaws, and his story resonates as a cautionary tale about the limits of human ambition and the costs of neglecting the deeper ethical foundations of society.

In reimagining Ravana, Neelakantan invites us to look beyond mythology's traditional, polarized, polarized narratives and appreciate human nature's complexity, showing us that even in our greatest heroes and villains, there is much more than meets the eye. Ravana's journey is not just that of a king but of every individual striving for greatness while grappling with their imperfections and limitations. Through *Asura*, Neelakantan presents a nuanced exploration of myth and modernity, urging readers to reflect on the timeless nature of these ancient stories and their relevance to contemporary world challenges.

CHAPTER V

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