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45. Good Vs Evil: Redefining the Meaning of Good and Evil with an Alternate Perspective in AnandNeelakandan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished.*

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Binary opposition is a key concept in Structuralism which states that all elements of human culture can only be understood in relation to one another and how they function within a larger system or the overall environment. The use of binary opposition in Literature is a system that writers use to explore differences between groups of individuals, such as cultural, class, or gender differences. We often encounter binary oppositions in cultural studies when exploring the relationships between different groups of people, for instance: upper – class and lower – class, male and female or the relationships between ideas like good and evil, heaven and hell, light and darkness, and so on. On the surface, these may seem merely like identifying labels, but what makes them binary opposites is the notion that they cannot coexist. The problem with the system of binary opposites is that it creates boundaries between groups of people or ideas and leads to prejudice and discrimination. One group may fear or consider a threat to the opposite group, referred as the 'other'.

In religion, ethics, philosophy, Literature and psychologygood and evil is a very common dichotomy. In Western cultures with Semitic religious influence, evil is perceived as the dualistic antagonistic opposite of good, in which good should prevail and evil should be defeated. In Eastern cultures with Buddhist spiritual influence, both good and evil are perceived as part of an antagonistic duality which must be overcome through achieving emptiness in the sense of recognition of good and evil being two opposing principles but not a reality, emptying the duality of them, and achieving a oneness.

All of us have a common collective memory of our grandparents narrating the tale of Lord Rama defeating the asura king Ravana. Each one of us have a memory to look back to in which we are too immersed in the characters of Rama and Ravana that personify the qualities of good and evil. Moreover, the story used to be a favorite during the festivals of Dussehra and Diwali. It is a fact that the most important theme of the epic *Ramayana* is good vs. evil. Lord Rama is an embodiment of qualities like goodness, righteousness, and virtuousness. On the other hand, the asura king Ravana personifies negative traits such as anger, corruption, greed, evil, and so on. In fact the most interesting thing is that the theme of good vs evil is not restricted to mythological tales and moral stories only. Rather, it is kind of universal; one that can be traced in the majority of books. From classic Greek texts like *The Iliad* or *Odyssey* to modern pop-fiction novels like *Harry Potter* or *James Bond* to Shakespearean plays, all signify the triumph of good over evil in some way or the other. This recurring theme of good vs evil raises an important question of why is literature so obsessed with the two binaries. Or has it always been so? Was Ravana always evil and Rama the personification of good? The answer to the question comes through Anand Neelakandan's spectacular fiction *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished (Asura)*. Neelakandan opens up a

new space for the readers to look at the events of the epic Ramayana from an alternative perspective, that is, from the perspective of Ravana and his people.

The story of the Ramayana had been told innumerable times. The enthralling story of Rama, the incarnation of God, who slew Ravana, the evil demon of darkness, is known to every Indian. And in the pages of history, as always, it is the version told by the victors that live on. The voice of the vanquished remains lost in silence. But what if Ravana and his people had a different story to tell? The story of the Ravanayana has never been told. Asura is the epic tale of the vanquished asura people, a story that has been cherished by the oppressed castes of India for 3000 years. Until now, no asura has dared to tell the tale. But perhaps the time has come for the dead and the defeated to speak. The ancient asura empire lay shattered into many warring petty kingdoms reeling under the heel of the devas. In desperation, the asuras look up to a young saviour – Ravana. Believing that a better world awaits them under Ravana, common men like Bhadra decide to follow the young leader. With a will of iron and a fiery ambition to succeed, Ravana leads his people from victory to victory and carves out a vast empire from the devas. But even when Ravana succeeds spectacularly, the poor asuras find that nothing much has changed from them. It is then that Ravana, by one action, changes the history of the world.

Literary history, however, has witnessed voices of the other side and this comprises the canon of Alternative Narratives. Adaptations of Ramayana by Chandrabati and Mola; Jotirao Phule"s scathing attacks on the Brahmins in his seminal works Gulamgiri and Shetkaryacha Asud and Omprakash Valmiki"s autobiography Joothan: A Dalit's Life are outstanding examples of this parallel line in literature. These texts have validated the definitive presence of an Alternative Voice, the one belonging to the oppressed and silenced. These narratives strove to see history and mythology by shifting the focalization to the marginalized, the other. A significant addition to this Alternative Voices is Asura: Tale of the Vanquished, The Story of Ravana and His People by Anand Neelakantan, a work belonging to the canon of Fiction, composed in 2012.

The narrative of Asura deviates from that of The Ramayana in the treatment of the central conflict behind the narratives: the abduction of Sita by Ravana. Asura constructs a narrative where Sita was abducted by Ravana to save her, from the masculinity rampant in the Deva kingdoms, because she was his daughter whom he was forced to abandon because the learned of his kingdom had prophesied disaster. This alteration in the narrative challenges the Rama-Ravana dichotomy by turning it around to Ravana-Rama duality. Ravana distinctly emerges as the hero for his fidelity towards his daughter, his accepting his decisions and his belief in the superiority of his culture that pushed him into the battle with Ram. His virtue shines in full glory when he accepts Mandodari even after she is molested by the forces of Rama during the war.

The superior-inferior dichotomy gets redefined when the voice of the other describes the kingdoms of the Devas and the Asuras. Mainstream Literature always projected a superior Deva culture in contrast to the inferior and uncivilized culture of the Asuras. Neelakandan's novel on the contrary, constructs the narrative of culture on opposite grounds, where the Asura civilization boasts of an egalitarian society under the leadership of Ravana, brought to destruction by the hierarchized Deva civilization. In other words, the narrative of Asura, constructs an India that is in direct confrontation with the India of Valmiki and Sankrityayan. At one place Ravana says,

These northern people had a strange custom. The father of the prospective bride would announce a contest among eligible suitors. I found it boorish. Was a bride a prize to be won in a contest? I had even heard of Deva men selling their wives as slaves, mortgaging them, or using them as wagers. It was terrible but what could one expect from a semi-civilized, nomadic tribe? Women were treated by the Deva men as nothing more than commodities. (Neelakandan 291)

In *The Ramayana*, Rama occupied the centre, marginalising Ravana as the 'Other'. On the other hand, Anand Neelakantan highlights the good qualities of Ravana. In this novel, Ravana has two phases. In the first phase, Ravana acts as a subaltern and in the other, he is the monarch. The novel portrays the double identity of Ravana where he is both an oppressed in his childhood and an oppressor, as a king. "But wherever I looked, I only saw oppression. Money, caste, rituals, traditions, beliefs and superstitions all conspired together to crush the humble majority. Why couldn't there be a more just way of living?" (Neelakantan 19)

The above lines show the oppression faced by Ravana from the society. Being the son of an Asura woman and a Brahmin, he experienced the feeling of a hybrid existence. Hybridization is a kind of negotiation, both political and cultural, between the colonizer and the colonized. In this novel Ravana represents both the colonizer and the colonised. He is colonised by the Devas and later when he becomes the king he transforms into the role of a coloniser. "Hybridity is the schizophrenic state of an individual as he seeks to combine two cultures without abandoning each other" (Nayar 197). In *Asura* Ravana is an example of hybridity. Ravana is depicted as man with dual identity as an oppressor and an oppressed.

Bhadra is also a narrator in this novel. He describes everything from a common man's point of view or rather from a subaltern perspective. He also explains his inner feeling and sufferings throughout the novel. Ravana's ambitious behaviour, his uncaring attitude towards his common people, his emphasis on his own exalted status, his debauchery, may be constantly viewed vice-versa as something that is happening in Bhadra's life. Having grievously suffered, and since he lost his entire family in a ghastly manner at the hands of the Devas, he blindly supports Ravana's efforts to establish a powerful Asura empire. Bhadra was the common man, whose life never changed, irrespective of whether Rama or Ravana ruled. He was a sceptic, selfish, amoral and oppressed, but he keeps his intellect intact and supports the establishment because it suits him. Even after knowing that his wife continued to enjoy Ravana's company, Bhadra was rather helpless. Bhadra mirrored many of Ravana's attitudes in his own life. Ravana, being excessively ambitious, occasionally wallows in mental dirt. Bhadra had no qualms wallowing in it physically, presumably in keeping with his place in society.

In an interview, Anand Neelakantan says that he created Bhadra as an image of common man. I created Bhadra as an image of the common man. Bhadra's voice is the voice of the muted majority. Bhadra was created to draw attention to this fact. It would have been easy to just say Ravana's story. But, then, as an author, my contribution would be zero. Bhadra anchors the story. His character gives it a third perspective. Bhadra is the bridge between the ancient world of the Ramayana and today. He is the window that allows us to gaze at that hazy period through modern eyes. (Devika 5)

In old folktales, no one fights for values or morals. Individual stories might display the virtues of uprightness or integrity, but there is no mention among folktales about which actions are good or evil. In a deeper level, Greek classical heroes like Achilles or Hector never stand for values of good or evil. They don't symbolize anything and they never use their values as the reason to fight. The attraction towards good vs. evil stories is a way of hiding from the complexity of the world. Usually, the villains are evil and proud who indulge in many immoral activities as well. However, the reason that people get away with doing horrifying things is usually that they are "good people". People deny crimes happening in front of them for decades because of entrenched power structures and because they have been trained to believe that people who do terrible things are different from us in some fundamental and easily recognized way.

This makes it crucial to understand that different people have different perspectives, desires, and values. Everyone in a situation can have a good and justifiable reason to do what they do and still fall into conflict and tragedy. So the meaning of good and evil or the meaning of hero and villain has to be redefined. From the perspective of the asura people Rama the king of the deva dynasty which destroyed their houses, culture and their livelihood is evil. At the same time for the deva people Rama is an embodiment of God who does everything, even the killings, for the greater good is good. From Ravana's perspective the men belonging to Rama's side that raped his wife and destroyed his country are evil and for Rama the man who abducted his wife Sita is evil. But for characters like Bhadra, a poor common asura, both Rama and Ravana are evil since the sufferings of people like him go unnoticed and unimportant under the regime of these two men. So the point that this research paper tries to put forth is "perspectives matter". With different and alternative perspectives the meaning of good and evil and the definition of hero and villain keeps changing. There cannot be absolute good and absolute evil just like how the postmodernists deny the existence of objective reality. One persons good may be the other persons evil and vice versa. Even with all the differences, as humans, there are basic things that we need like love, independence, and safety. It requires a lifetime to find the balance between these things, and it is always complex, as the English singer and songwriter Eric Burdon pointed out: "Inside each of us, there is the seed of both good and evil. It's a constant struggle as to which one will win. And one cannot exist without the other."

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