



## **THE FAILURE OF THE DIVINE ORDER: SUBALTERN GLITCHES AND COUNTER-MYTHS OF RAVANA AND PROMETHEUS**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines how sacred narratives construct divine authority through narrative closure, ritualized punishment, and moral absolutism. Rather than treating Ravana and Prometheus as figures awaiting ethical rehabilitation, the study reads them as structural disruptions that expose the hidden mechanics sustaining sacred power. Through a comparative analysis of Valmiki's Ramayana, Aeschylus's Prometheus Bound, and their modern rewritings in Anand Neelakantan's Asura: Tale of the Vanquished and Percy Bysshe Shelley's Prometheus Unbound, the paper argues that epic and tragic forms function as ideological systems that naturalize political dominance by framing it as cosmic necessity. The concept of the 'subaltern glitch' names the moment when the silenced antagonist begins to articulate the rules governing exclusion. This articulation transforms myth from sacred inheritance into visible infrastructure. Once these codes surface, divine authority loses transcendence and appears contingent, violent, and strategically maintained. The study reframes counter-myth as a site of ethical reorientation rather than heroic inversion, with implications for myth studies, political theology, and postcolonial literary criticism.*

### **Keywords**

*Subaltern Glitch, Counter-Myth, Sacred Ideology, Narrative Power, Political Theology, etc.*

### **Full Article**

#### **Introduction:**

Recent literary criticism has increasingly turned toward the recovery of marginalized figures in classical and sacred narratives. Studies of subalternity, counter-epic traditions, demonized antagonists, and revisionist myth have sought to correct the moral asymmetry of canonical texts by restoring voice to those once silenced. Re-readings of Ravana and Prometheus now circulate widely, portraying them as misunderstood heroes, ethical dissidents, or victims of divine tyranny. While such approaches have expanded the scope of comparative myth studies, they often remain tethered to the same moral universe they claim to challenge. The gods are still assumed to represent a meaningful ethical order; the only change lies in who is allowed to speak within that order. As a result, the sacred narrative itself continues to function as a stable frame rather than an object of critique.

This paper begins from a different premise. It does not ask how Ravana or Prometheus can be redeemed within their respective traditions, nor does it attempt to invert the moral polarity of hero and villain. Instead, it questions the narrative architecture that requires such polarities in the first place. Sacred epics and classical tragedies do not merely recount moral struggles; they



construct closed systems of meaning that organize power, knowledge, and legitimacy. Within these systems, divine authority is not an external truth but a narrative mechanism sustained through repetition, exclusion, and ritualized punishment. The so-called villain is not a deviation from the system but a structural necessity that allows the divine order to appear coherent, operating as what Michel Foucault terms a ‘regime of truth’ produced and maintained through discourse (Foucault, 131).

The *Ramayana* and *Prometheus Bound* exemplify this logic with striking clarity. Ravana’s defeat confirms the righteousness of Rama; Prometheus’s torment secures Zeus’s sovereignty. Their suffering is not incidental to the story’s ethics; it is the engine that stabilizes it. Justice is not discovered but produced through narrative design. The cosmic order is rendered natural precisely because its violence is framed as necessary. Once this mechanism is recognized, the moral claims of the sacred text no longer appear self-evident. They reveal themselves as ideological constructions masked as transcendental law.

The modern rewritings’ *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* by Anand Neelakantan and *Prometheus Unbound* by Percy Bysshe Shelley intervene at the most vulnerable point in this structure: the silence of the condemned figure. When Ravana and Prometheus begin to narrate themselves, the system experiences a form of breakdown. Their speech does not simply add a new perspective; it exposes the rules by which the narrative governs meaning. This paper describes such moments as glitch points where the hidden programming of the sacred text becomes visible. A glitch is not rebellion; it is malfunction. It reveals that what appears as eternal law is, in fact, a coded structure designed to preserve authority.

The term subaltern glitch therefore names a structural phenomenon rather than a political identity. Ravana and Prometheus are not important because they resist the gods, but because their presence destabilizes the logic that allows divine power to present itself as moral necessity. Once the antagonized figure speaks, the sacred narrative can no longer sustain its claim to universality. Its authority fractures, not through opposition, but through exposure, echoing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s insistence that subaltern speech reveals the limits of dominant epistemic systems rather than merely opposing them (Spivak, 308).

This study argues that the rewritings of Neelakantan and Shelley generate counter-myths not by replacing one moral order with another, but by dismantling the conditions that make any divine order appear inevitable. The failure of the divine does not arrive as dramatic overthrow; it emerges as structural exhaustion. What collapses is not belief, but the narrative machinery that once sustained it. Through this lens, Ravana and Prometheus cease to be characters awaiting redemption. They become sites where sacred power reveals its limits and where new ethical possibilities begin to take shape.

### **Sacred Narratives as Closed Ideological Systems:**

Epics and classical tragedies do not merely recount divine histories; they manufacture moral universes. Their authority emerges not from ethical openness but from structural enclosure. The worlds of *The Ramayana* and *Prometheus Bound* are governed by internally sealed logics that transform political power into cosmic necessity. These narratives stabilize authority by scripting morality as destiny and obedience as transcendence. The divine, far from a source of ethical freedom, operates as a regulatory mechanism that disciplines subjectivity, polices dissent, and renders ideological violence invisible. The gods do not represent justice. They perform it through narrative design.

Dharma in Valmiki’s *Ramayana* is framed as a timeless ethical absolute, yet it functions as a juridical code that privileges hierarchy and obedience over compassion. Rama’s exile, publicly sanctified as moral sacrifice, conceals the machinery of political compliance. He does not question



the decree that banishes him; he transforms it into sacred inevitability. ‘Truth is the root of dharma,’ he proclaims, insisting that his father’s word must be honored even at the cost of familial devastation (Valmiki, 2.20). The utterance collapses moral deliberation into ritual obedience. Dharma ceases to be ethical inquiry and becomes an instrument of social regulation.

Zeus’s law in *Prometheus Bound* operates through the same architecture. Sovereignty is aestheticized as divine order, yet it is enforced through terror rather than consent. Prometheus exposes the fragility of this order when he names Zeus a tyrant who ‘trusts only his own power’ (Aeschylus, 38). This is not rebellion against heaven; it is an exposure of the political fiction embedded within divine rhetoric. Zeus’s rule, framed as cosmic stabilization, mirrors the logic of authoritarian regimes: violence is recoded as preservation, domination as destiny.

These systems depend on binary moral cartographies. Characters are assigned fixed ethical locations that foreclose complexity. Ravana is labeled a demon long before his political world is allowed intelligibility. His kingdom is prosperous, his devotion to Shiva intense, his grief for Sita profound. None of these disrupt the narrative verdict. He must remain monstrous because the moral economy of the epic cannot accommodate a sovereign who exists beyond dharma yet embodies cultural legitimacy. Ravana is not a deviation from the system; he is its necessary antagonist. His destruction reaffirms Rama’s authority by rendering dissent ontologically corrupt.

Prometheus occupies an analogous position. His theft of fire inaugurates civilization, yet the act is criminalized to protect divine supremacy. The crime is not technological transgression but epistemic independence. Hermes demands submission, not dialogue, insisting that obedience is the only form of redemption (Aeschylus, 1025–1030). Prometheus’s chained body becomes a theatrical surface upon which Zeus’s sovereignty is inscribed. His suffering is not corrective; it is exemplary. The spectacle instructs the audience in the consequences of dissent.

Teleological closure seals these systems. Sacred narratives rarely tolerate unresolved tension. Rama is crowned. Zeus remains unchallenged. The endings perform ideological containment rather than ethical resolution. Sita’s trial by fire illustrates this logic with brutal clarity. Her body becomes the site upon which social suspicion is purged and patriarchal authority restored. Rama’s justification ‘I acted to clear my name before the world’ (Valmiki, 6.118) transfers moral accountability to public perception. Surveillance replaces justice. The ritual absolves the system while erasing the woman it sacrifices.

Retellings fracture this enclosure. Kavita Kane’s *Lanka’s Princess* reimagines Ravana as a philosopher-king ensnared by political rivalry rather than metaphysical evil. Jeanette Winterson’s *Weight* reframes Prometheus as a figure of ethical resistance whose punishment exposes the fear sustaining divine authority. These revisions do not negate the originals; they reveal the ideological labor those originals perform. By restoring interiority to the condemned, retellings expose the violence masked as cosmic order.

Sacred narratives endure because they convert power into transcendence. Their gods do not descend from heaven; they rise from the need to stabilize hierarchy. Law masquerades as fate. Punishment masquerades as justice. Closure masquerades as truth. Ravana and Prometheus are sacrificed not because they are wrong, but because they threaten to reveal that the sacred is constructed, not eternal. Their silencing restores the illusion. The system survives. The cost is rendered invisible.

### **Subaltern Glitches and Narrative Malfunction:**

Sacred epics sustain themselves through silence. Their authority depends on a single stabilized moral voice that pretends to speak for the cosmos while quietly scripting political obedience. When the condemned begin to narrate, the system stutters. Narrative coherence fractures. What appears eternal reveals itself as procedural. The retellings of Neelakantan and Shelley generate



such ruptures by allowing Ravana and Prometheus to articulate their own histories. Their voices do not merely protest exclusion; they expose the internal grammar that sustains sacred power.

Walter Benjamin argues that ‘law-making power is revealed as violence’ whenever authority must reassert itself through punishment (Benjamin, 287). This insight clarifies the logic beneath both dharma and Zeus’s law. These systems are not maintained through moral persuasion but through ritualized coercion. In Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, Ravana’s moral status is decided before he speaks. He exists as a function of dharma’s stability rather than as a historical subject. When Neelakantan reclaims his voice in *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, Ravana becomes legible as a political figure shaped by humiliation, dispossession, and resistance. The sacred code begins to tremble, not because Ravana denies dharma, but because he reveals it as a cultural monopoly.

The original epic contains suppressed fissures that momentarily disturb its closure. Ravana faces death with composure, acknowledging fate rather than guilt, a gesture that grants him tragic dignity rather than demonic finality (Valmiki, 6.111). The text swiftly absorbs this moment into ritual restoration, yet the rupture remains. Once a condemned figure speaks as a subject, the sacred narrative must labor to silence him again.

Prometheus occupies a parallel position. His voice in *Prometheus Bound* is permitted only to dramatize punishment. He declares that Zeus governs through fear, not justice, exposing sovereignty as a theatrical performance of dominance (Aeschylus, 38–40). The gods respond with intensified violence. Speech itself becomes transgression. The tragedy reveals what Judith Butler identifies as the politics of silence: ‘Power operates not only by what it allows to be said, but by what it compels to remain unspoken’ (Butler, 14). Prometheus’s articulation threatens Zeus not because it defies him, but because it names the logic of his rule.

Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* radicalizes this disruption. By freeing Prometheus from the tragic frame, Shelley converts suffering into philosophical resistance. Zeus no longer appears as a divine necessity but as an obsolete figure of authoritarian logic. Sovereignty is stripped of transcendence and revealed as contingent, sustained through fear rather than ethical legitimacy. Narrative malfunction occurs when the antagonist’s voice exposes the rules of the system. Ravana’s articulation in Neelakantan’s retelling reveals how dharma functions as an ideological script that naturalizes conquest and sanctifies hierarchy. Prometheus’s refusal to submit reveals divine law as procedural rather than moral. These moments function as what Hannah Arendt describes as the exposure of authority’s fragility: “Where violence rules absolutely, power disappears” (Arendt, 56). The sacred must therefore disguise its violence as cosmic necessity to preserve the illusion of power.

The *Ramayana* dramatizes this disguise through Sita’s trial by fire. Rama justifies the ordeal not through personal doubt but through public surveillance, declaring that he must clear his name before the world (Valmiki, 6.118). Justice is displaced by reputation. The sacred system survives by sacrificing those who threaten its coherence. The ritual restores narrative closure while concealing its political cost.

Subaltern narration does not seek inclusion within sacred systems. It exposes their dependency on exclusion. Ravana and Prometheus transform silence into critique, punishment into evidence, divinity into discourse. Their voices fracture mythic authority and reveal sacred law as a language of power rather than truth. Once the antagonist speaks, the epic can no longer pretend innocence. The sacred becomes visible as design. The system falters. The glitch persists.

### **Counter-Myth and the Collapse of Divine Order:**

Sacred myths endure not because they are true, but because they are closed. Their authority depends on presenting power as metaphysical rather than historical. Kings do not rule; they incarnate destiny. Gods do not command; they stabilize the universe. Moral order appears not as a



negotiated human structure but as a natural law woven into the fabric of existence. Yet once the antagonist becomes a conscious narrator, the system's metaphysical disguise collapses. Neelakantan and Shelley do not merely replace one hero with another. They dismantle the architecture that allows any figure to rule by divine legitimacy. Their counter-myths expose sacred authority as a cultural technology designed to convert political violence into moral necessity.

Roland Barthes defines myth as a structure that “transforms history into nature” (Barthes, 129). The *Ramayana* and *Prometheus Bound* depend on this transformation. Rama's sovereignty and Zeus's dominion appear as cosmic inevitabilities rather than institutional regimes. Once, Ravana and Prometheus speak as historical subjects rather than symbolic villains and this naturalization fractures. Law becomes visible as performance. Divinity becomes legible as rhetoric. The sacred loses its opacity and reveals its scaffolding.

In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, dharma functions as a totalizing horizon. Every act aligned with it is framed as ethically coherent, even when it produces visible suffering. Exile, war, abandonment, trial by fire each is ritualized as moral necessity rather than interrogated as political choice. Ravana's death completes the cycle of restoration, yet his final words acknowledge that he is not defeated by justice but by the machinery of inevitability itself, recognizing the force of narrative destiny rather than moral guilt (Valmiki, 6.111). The epic quickly seals this admission beneath coronation and celebration, restoring the illusion of cosmic balance.

Neelakantan's *Asura* refuses this closure. Ravana is no longer a function of dharma's coherence. He becomes a historical subject shaped by humiliation, caste violence, cultural erasure, and geopolitical rivalry. Lanka is no longer a demonic inversion of Ayodhya; it is a civilization positioned outside the narrative center. Once Ravana names the violence embedded within divine order, dharma ceases to appear universal. It reveals itself as a culturally specific code masquerading as cosmic truth. Sacred morality becomes territorial, bound to the interests of those who control its language.

Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* stages a parallel collapse. Zeus is introduced as the architect of order, yet Prometheus exposes the regime beneath the rhetoric. He names Zeus a tyrant who governs through fear rather than justice (Aeschylus, 38–40). This utterance destabilizes the divine economy. Zeus does not respond with moral argument. He intensifies punishment. Thunder replaces reason. Violence replaces legitimacy. Sovereignty survives not through ethical coherence but through spectacle.

Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* radicalizes this rupture. Zeus is not reformed. He is erased. The cosmos is reimaged as a space of shared ethical imagination rather than hierarchical command. Prometheus does not ascend as a new god. He becomes a catalyst for relational ethics, a figure whose endurance signals the possibility of a world no longer organized around fear. Justice migrates from transcendence to collective reasoning. Authority loses its metaphysical shelter and must answer to human conscience.

Jacques Rancière insists that political rupture occurs when those without a recognized voice claim the right to speak. Ravana and Prometheus enact this rupture. Their counter-myths do not seek moral supremacy. They dissolve the architecture that produces moral centralization. The sacred no longer appears eternal. It appears constructed. Hannah Arendt warns that authority collapses when it must rely solely on violence to sustain itself. Both epics reveal this collapse once the antagonists articulate their truths. Zeus's thunder and Rama's rituals no longer appear as signs of divine justice. They appear as mechanisms of control. The sacred system becomes legible as a political structure invested in its own survival.

The *Ramayana* dramatizes this crisis through Sita's trial by fire. Rama justifies the ordeal not through personal doubt but through public surveillance, claiming that he must clear his name before the world (Valmiki, 6.118). Justice is displaced by reputation. Ethical responsibility is



subordinated to spectacle. The sacred survives by sacrificing those who expose its fragility. Counter-myth refuses such sacrifices. It does not enthrone a new god. It abolishes the need for one. The subaltern no longer occupies the margins of sacred history. He becomes the architect of a counter-cosmos where moral authority is negotiated rather than decreed, where power must answer rather than command. The collapse of divine order does not produce chaos. It produces ethical possibility. The sacred loses its throne. Humanity inherits the burden of justice.

### Conclusion:

Ravana and Prometheus are not rehabilitated heroes. They are structural disruptions that fracture the moral architectures built to contain them. Their importance does not lie in reversal but in exposure. Once they speak, the sacred systems that condemned them lose their transparency. What once appeared divine is revealed as procedural. What once claimed eternity begins to resemble a technology of control. The antagonist ceases to function as a moral error and becomes a diagnostic site where the mechanics of sacred power are laid bare. Subaltern Glitch Theory names this rupture. It does not celebrate resistance as virtue, nor does it seek to replace one sovereign with another. Its force emerges from the moment when the narrative system stutters when the excluded voice begins to articulate the rules that govern its own erasure. The glitch does not destroy the sacred order through confrontation. It renders the order visible. Power falters not because it is attacked, but because its codes are decoded. This framework carries implications far beyond Ravana and Prometheus. In myth studies, it reorients analysis away from archetypes and toward narrative governance. In political theology, it exposes how divine authority borrows its stability from the very violences it conceals. In postcolonial literature, it clarifies how imperial and sacred logics depend upon silencing alternate histories. Subaltern Glitch Theory offers a language for reading myth not as inheritance, but as infrastructure. Sacred systems do not collapse under rebellion alone. They endure revolt. What they cannot survive is legibility. When their exclusions become visible, their punishments lose transcendence, their closures lose credibility, their gods lose inevitability. Ravana and Prometheus are not redeemed. They are not absolved. They remain disruptive because they reveal that sacred order is not natural law but narrative design. The myth does not fall when it is opposed. It falls when it is understood.

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**Article Received:**16/02/2026

**Article Accepted:**20/02/2026

**Published Online:**30/03/2026

**To Cite the Article:** *Sangeetha, P. and Natarajan, M.* “The Failure of the Divine Order: Subaltern Glitches and Counter-Myths of Ravana and Prometheus.” *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.-VI, Issue-4, March, 2026, 173-179. [www.literarycognizance.com](http://www.literarycognizance.com)

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