



**TECHNIQUES OF HUMANIZATION AND DEMYTHOLOGIZATION IN  
ANAND NEELAKANTAN'S ASURA: TALE OF THE VANQUISHED**

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**Abstract**

*This paper is a critical analysis of the postmodern technique of humanization used by Anand Neelakantan in his novel *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*. The mythological figures are presented as human beings having no superhuman capacities other than human agency. The postmodern technique allows the novelists unearth the buried voices, perspectives and stories of human resilience. This narrative technique emphasizes on the presentation of the mythological characters as human beings. This technique allows the writers to make the mythological characters accessible for scrutiny and analysis. Ravana and Rama are stripped off their deification and presented as human beings with a mixture of good and bad qualities. The character of Ravana is usually presented in the grand narrative of *The Ramayana* as a devil incarnate whereas, Rama is generally perceived as the incarnation of God. The writer portrays the two characters in socio-political context. The struggle between the two characters is not seen as a struggle between good and evil but between the two kings fighting for supremacy.*

**Keywords**

*Demythologization, Asura, Humanization, Postmodern Narrative Technique, Human Agency, etc.*

**Full Article**

In *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, Anand Neelakantan uses the postmodern techniques of demythologization and humanization in order to subvert the Grand narrative of the *Ramayana*. This paper examines how the mythological characters like Ravana and Rama were controlled by the socio-political conditions around them and how they exhibited the influence of the scriptures and traditions on their behaviors. This paper is an analysis of the two techniques mentioned above in the context of Anand Neelakantan's novel *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*. The two characters narrate the story of their Asura empire— Ravana and Bhadra. By narrating the novel from the loser's point of view, the mythological character of Rama is brought under critical scrutiny and evaluation. This novel explores the two mythological characters and their conflicting ideologies.

Anand Neelakantan does not accord divinity to his characters so that they are inaccessible for criticism and scrutiny. The features provided to the mythical characters are termed as “humanized features” by Irin M. (Irin, 50). Ravana becomes a mouthpiece of Anand Neelakantan technique of humanizing the mythological characters in this novel. Ravana does not only deny Rama having any divine superpowers, he also ridicules the very idea of divinity. Ravana sees Rama as a shrewd tactician who takes the shield of divinity to pass off his dictates in the society. Ravana undermines Rama's claims of being godly and having the blessings of God. He notes,



“Claim that God is with you, or better, you are God, then anything you do, any adharmayou commit, becomes divine play” (Neelakantan, 368).

As also stated earlier Ravana is happy with being a “complete man” rather than being a “perfect man” as aspired for by Rama. “I did not intend to become Rama, the perfect man, and God. There was no dearth of gods in my country. It only lacked men” (Neelakantan, 354). In the novel, the portrayal of Ravana occupies more space than the portrayal of Rama. As a narrative strategy, Anand Neelakantan concedes less space to Rama whereby the other good qualities of Rama lay out of sight of the readers. The character of Ravana is observed more closely. Generally the narrative of the Ramayana is concluded at the death of Ravana and Rama's ascension to the throne of Ayodhya.

However the novelist concludes the story at a further point of time. Ravana dies on the battlefield fighting for a cause to the last of his breaths whereas Rama dies in his Kingdom in a pitiful condition. Rama of the novel is a “simple prince weakened and manipulated by the stronghold of Brahmins and the Hindu principles” (Jain, 627). “ordinary man with almost all the traits of a normal human being devoid of all sorts of special powerful weapons and magical powers” (Arathi, 43).

Rama appears in the novel as a prince who was morally questionable, misogynist and bowing to the public sentiments at the price of his wife's dignity and self-respect. By his war tactics he appears as a ruthless murderer of the masses. Archana Tanwar observes that in this retelling, “Rama is also portrayed as a human being, a cruel, diplomatic king who fought only to win. His army is ruthless” (Tanwar, 105). His actions appear to be arising out of the socio-political constraints of the time and aimed at gaining wider support rather than holding an absolute moral ground. In this way, Anand Neelakantan shows him as a merciless victor. His goodness is as per the traditions and the dictates of the scriptures. As such, “Rama's goodness is in question as it merely reflects a Brahminical worldview” (Wongchalard, 3).

Ravana provides an example of Rama's decisions influenced by the temporary socio-political condition. He expresses his surprise over Rama's decision to leave his throne though the people wanted him as their king. Ravana comments that he accepted the exile just in order to show how obedient and respectful he was towards his father. Thus, Rama yields to the image of an ideal son. He says, “I hated Rama for his false ego and eagerness to prove his self-righteousness to the world. I would never understand his logic” Further he criticized his father for giving such a promise which is unbecoming to a king. It was “against Raja Dharma”. And, he argues “As the heir, it was Rama's duty to rise against the king who had acted unjustly” (Asura, 300). Ravana criticizes Rama's war techniques and his murder of the Bandra King Bali, mutilation of his sister Soorpnakha, his decision to put a city on fire during a night as well as dangers regarding the attack by Rama's army. His following observations are worth quoting here in full:

“This war was different and every Asura knew in his bones that he was dealing with a ruthless and unscrupulous enemy led by a general who would, under the cover of night, set cities on fire. An enemy who was led by a Prince who would hide behind a tree and shoot arrows to kill a noble King engaged in a duel with his brother. An enemy who was also led by a Prince who had stooped to cutting off the ears and nose of a woman. The shadows lengthened and we were terrified as never before” (Neelakantan, 375).

Ravana compares his war tactics with those of Rama. In contrast to Rama's ways of killing his enemies, Ravana claims to have fought honorably. She says he had an opportunity to shoot Lakshmana and kill him there and then but it would have been very unbecoming to an honorable king. “Hiding behind a tree and shooting an unsuspecting enemy, was a eunuch's way of fighting. I was an Asura and an Emperor. Such acts were not part of my character and went



against my sense of fair play and justice. But had I known then what levels Rama and his brother were capable of stooping to, I would have surely finished them off there and then (Neelakantan, 308- 9). He notes the irony of his fate. Rather than getting an award for fighting fairly and ethically, “So I lie here now, betrayed and cheated, bleeding and being eaten by rodents, slain lesser men who used dubious means to kill and win” (Neelakantan, 308-09).

He enforces the caste-system through this example throughout his empire. After the fall of Ravana, Ravana declares to all the people in his kingdom that the kingdom will be divided into four *Varnas* and each has to act according to the duties of his *Varna*. Thus, he acts as per the scriptures disregarding his conscience. Shambuka’s mother, Arasi questions what sacred did her son break and how is it dharma to kill a small curious boy. She urges Rama to rethink what consists of a *dharma* or *adharna*: If your dharma needs to be protected from a little boy, by killing him... think if you can... what sort of dharma you are protecting and whose hands hold the strings that control you” (Neelakantan, 312).

The treatment Rama gives to his wife Sita is outrageous. If compared this to Ravana’s treatment to his wife after she is sexually assaulted during the war by Ravana’s Vanara army, Ravana turns out to be having a refined sensitivity than Rama does. Ravana accepts his wife respectfully, while “*maryadapurushottam* Rama abandons his wife even after she proves her chastity” (Parmar, 132). In the popular narrative of the victors, Rama rescues his wife: however, in this version of the Ramayana, it is Ravana who risks his kingdom over the safety and love of his daughter. Again, Sita is forced to prove her purity after she confronts Rama in the forest with her twin sons. She gives her second trial by fire because, “the King’s wife had to be above suspicion” (Neelakantan, 318).

In contrast to Rama socially and politically conditioned ethics Ravana has a moral compass of his own having its connections with the Asura philosophy. The traditional wisdom inherited by Ravana teaches him that “One should not cheat even if one was sure to fail. One should honour women and not insult anyone” (Neelakantan, 18). In comparison to the scores of scriptures of Rama's religion, the Asura religion, according to Ravana, “was based on simple things: a man should be true to his word; he should speak from his heart and shouldn’t do anything he considered wrong. One should not cheat even if one was sure to fail. One should honour women and not insult anyone. If there was injustice, we had to fight it at all costs. We never knew any of the great teachings of the ancient Asura or Deva” (Neelakantan, 17). He further elaborates that the Asuras “never strayed from the path of righteousness. Our sense of justice was different from what the learned and privileged considered right. We decided our righteousness and we defined our rights in our own way” (Neelakantan, 17).

Both the characters lead their lives as per their own religious ideologies. Ravana dies in his attempt to save not only his Kingdom but also the ideology for which it stood. Rama also had to sacrifice the two people whom he loves the most just in order to save his Dharma. Rama’s horse is stopped by his twin sons in a forest. Sita has raised her twin sons Lav and Kusha. Rama orders that his wife Sita should prove her chastity by jumping into fire. She does so again but she runs and jumps off a cliff into the river Sarayu. She is never found. Rama later orders that his brother Lakshmana should be punished for a mistake.

Thus, Bhadra narrates, “Rama had sacrificed the two people who he loved most, for the sake of his Dharma. He became more and more depressed and withdrawn, and finally found eternal solace in the dark waters of the Sarayu. It was an inglorious end to a king who had defeated one of the most colorful and glorious men in history” (Asura, 493). While traditional epics conclude with Rama’s glorious reign, Neelakantan depicts his end as a hollow victory. He is seen as a man who "sacrificed everything—his wife, his brother and his conscience, for that



dharna” (Neelakantan, 323). Rama ultimately dies “alone, extremely unhappy and with a heavy conscience” (Jain, 626). Bhadra compares the lives of the two kings,

“Rama stuck to the literal words of scriptures. He led an unhappy life and sacrificed everything – his wife, his brother and his conscience, for that Dharma.... Ravana was a man who lived life on his own terms, doing what you thought was right and caring nothing for what was written by the holy men; a man who lived life fully and died a warrior's death. Like their lives, beliefs, values and definitions of Dharma, the manner of their death was also contradictory” (Neelakantan, 493-94).

Even though both the characters had some flaws of their own as well as some of the greatest quality yet the history isn't always impartial. Bhadra speculates that in the times to come, an impartial evaluation of both the personalities will not be possible. He knows very well that the legends, chronicles and histories are written in support of the victors and the vanquished are always ill-reported. He envisions, “As time goes by, Rama may become God and Ravana the demon, for one was Putty in the hands of the priests and the other as obstinate as a rock, self-willed and unorthodox” (Neelakantan, 494).

To conclude, the two major characters are foils to one another. The protagonist of the novel Ravana has no wish to enter the heaven by becoming a perfect man or demi-god. He simply aspires to be a complete man whereas, Rama aspires to become the perfect man. Ravana considers that all human emotions are essential for the growth and development of a person and also they are the mark of a person's human identity. He argues to his Guru King Mahabali during his training to him that rather than suppressing the basic feelings, they need to be utilised for higher purposes. The final victory of Rama over Ravana is not presented here as simply a victory of a King over the other. It has higher implications; it is the victory of one ideology over the other. Rama is presented as brutal, merciless and shrewd whereas Ravana is portrayed as righteous, caring and honourably fighting person. The narrative of Rama's war against Ravana is also subverted illustrating many examples.

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**Article Received:**22/09/2025

**Article Accepted:**29/09/2025

**Published Online:**30/09/2025

**To Cite the Article:** Ghogre, Manisha and Mannikar, Prashant. “Techniques of Humanization and Demythologization in Anand Neelakantan’s *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished.*” *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.-VI, Issue-2, September, 2025, 213-217. [www.literarycognizance.com](http://www.literarycognizance.com)

