

Mythofiction as Voice of the Defeated with special reference to Anand Neelakantan's *Asura, Ajaya and Rise of Kali* and Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*

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INTRODUCTION

Mythofiction or mythological retellings although considered to be a new form of popular fiction and a new genre of English literature is not new in the subcontinent of India. Kalidas wrote *Abhigyanam Shakuntalam* and *Kumarsambhav* back in 5th century both retelling stories from Hindu mythological texts of *Adi Parvan* and *Skanda Purana*. *Urubhangam* was written by Bhasa in the 3rd century telling the story of *Mahabharat* from the point of view of Duryodhan while Bhavabhuti wrote retellings of stories from *Ramayan* in his books *Mahaviracharitra* and *Uttararamacharitra*.

Recently authors like Iravati Karve, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, Devdutt Pattanaik, Anand Neelakantan and Amish Tripathi revived this tradition of retellings of mythological stories. This genre is dedicated to the rich mythological tradition of a community, tribe, subcontinent, country or world. Authors of this particular genre retell an old mythological story from a new perspective. Their retellings differ from that of the original story in many ways as they make changes in the original story as per their requirement adding tales they have created or giving new characteristics to the existing characters.

It is very interesting to note how the concept of miracle and magic in the mythological tales are deconstructed by the authors of mythofiction and how they give different meanings and associate different symbolism to explain the supernatural actions of the mythology. The aim of this paper is to compare both the original mythological stories and their new counterparts to trace the development of ideas and symbolism that are used to deconstruct them.

Words hold immense power and how they are communicated construct history, and history more often than not is created by war- political or intellectual. Hence, the side that wins writes history the way they want and the side that doesn't win loses their voice to represent themselves throughout history. In this paper, the retellings of mythological stories from the side of the defeated will be traced to compare them with that of the original stories from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* to see how they differ and more importantly why they differ.

WHAT IS MYTHOLOGY?

If I ask the question, who is Shiva? A Hindu will probably answer Shiva is the God residing in Mount Kailash. He wears bark and animal skin, smears ash on his body, has matted hair that entraps the flow of river Ganga. The moon sits on his locks of matted hair and he is adorned with a snake for a necklace. His consort is Goddess Parvati and he is the father of Scand and Ganesh. A non- Hindu having basic knowledge about Indian culture will probably answer that Shiva is a god of Hindu mythology, while

someone having no knowledge of Hindu tradition will be bewildered by the description given by a Hindu. How can the moon sit on the top of one's head? How can one control the flow of a river by entrapping it in his matted hair? And how does a Hindu know all this?

The description of Shiva comes from the mythological stories of Hindu tradition. Mythology or myth although in the modern context is considered as an equivalent of falsehood was not so in terms of its origins. Myth originates from the Greek word 'Mythos' which means belief or assumption. *Mythos* is known as 'Mithya' in Sanskrit while its antonym *Satya* is known as 'Logos' in Greek which means reason. *Mithya* and *Satya*, therefore, represent the age-old clash between beliefs and facts. *Logos* explained how certain things happen but it fails to explain why they happen and for that purpose, one turns to *Mythos*. Because *Satya* is the ultimate truth, it is formless and boundless and could not be reduced to a word which is incomplete or flawed by itself, therefore escaping communication which is essential for understanding *Satya*. So *Mithya* becomes the medium through which *Satya* is communicated. Through hundreds and thousands of words strung together, the human mind could understand a small proportion of the limitless *Satya*.

A myth is essentially an idea that cannot be rationalized beyond a point and is a social construct and hence makes sense only to a particular group of people. This group or community is bound together because of their understanding of this idea. For example, in the Christian understanding of the world one either sins or one doesn't, there is no

concept of 'Punya' there. If myth is an abstract idea, mythology is the language that makes that abstract idea tangible to us through stories, symbols and rituals.

WHAT IS MYTHOFICTION?

Stories of mythology inspire awe; the stories of God with ten hands and thousand heads is told to induce the sense of sublime because, in order to be buoyed and carried forth over the winds of changing times, a tale or an idea needs to be awe-inspiring as nobody remembers the mundane. And so to make a mundane story extraordinary one has to add the element of sublime to it. This sublimity of irrational plots and characters ensures their flawless transmission over generations.

Mythology tends to be hyperbolic and fantastic to drive home a myth. Belief is generated from myth while customs stems from mythology. Myths conditions thoughts and feelings, mythology influences behaviours and communications. Thus, myths and mythologies have a profound influence on culture and in turn, get influenced by the culture as well.

People outgrow myth and mythology when they fail to respond to their cultural needs with changing times. Like in ancient Egypt people built pyramids because they believed in the underworld ruled by Osiris and the Greeks buried copper coins with the dead as a payment for the ferryman Charon. But now there are no pyramids neither are the copper coins buried with the dead because people have outgrown that myth.

The tales from *Mahabharat* and *Ramayana* and from other mythological texts like *The Puranas* are retold by different authors in different times and with each retelling, the story and the characters had undergone many changes. These texts are considered mythological because their authors are unknown, although the authorship of these texts are credited to Ved Vyas and Valmiki respectively, that is because Vyas and Valmiki are not just the authors but also serve as a character in these epics, but unlike Homer no historical evidence is still unearthed to prove the existence of these sages. Mythofiction, on the other hand, has authors whose existence is proven historically or we know them as human of flesh and blood because they exist in our contemporary time.

The coinage of the terms 'Mythofiction', 'Mythic Fiction' or 'Mythological Fiction' are credited to Charles de Lint and Terri Windling. This genre of literature is inspired by legends, myths and folklores; they retell stories from ancient mythological texts but add the ideals of that time or the zeitgeist in the plot of the story. Because of the difference in ideologies and way of life the same character in two different retelling of the same story tends to act differently. Both *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* tells stories of war where one side wins and another loses but, in order to understand why one side had complete hold over the story, it is important to have an understanding of the 'history' that fabricated the two most famous epic of this subcontinent. The texts seem to be engendered in synchrony but have to be interpreted 'diachronically'.

THE MAKING OF INDIA

India is a land of continental size and geographically it is the seventh largest country in the world. But India as it is known today in the world has a history that could be traced back to millenniums. Great civilizations took birth here and saw their doom in this subcontinent. The political and social structure of this nation had undergone great changes throughout centuries. Today, India has four major religions namely Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism and other minorities like Islam, Christianity and Zoroastrians.

The ancient Harappan people followed a form of Hinduism as the statue of *Pashupati* found from the excavation tells us that. Jainism founded by Lord Mahavir the twenty-fourth *Tirthankar*, was adopted as a religion by the people between 599-527 BC, Buddhism became popular as a religion between 500-200 BC.

Islam first came to India with the Arab traders back in the 7th century and gained popularity after the Delhi sultanate. The Slave Dynasty was established in 1206 AD and Christianity was introduced here by Thomas The Apostle who visited Muziris in Kerala in 52 AD. The uniqueness of this country lies in the fact that it is united even though the social and cultural structure is diversified, unity in diversity makes India special and the fact that the people of this nation have always welcomed change and adapted themselves to adopt the new social change ensured its continued existence.

This great nation saw rise and fall of many religions and civilizations. History tells us that the Indus valley civilization is also known as Harappan civilization (C.2800/2900 – 1800 BC) is one of the first human civilizations of the world which was spread over the whole of modern-day Sind, Baluchistan, almost whole of Punjab, northern Rajasthan, Kathiawar and Gujarat.

Archaeology reveals that the most remarkable feature of this civilization was its urbanization. The town planning reveals a great sense of architectural planning and organization, there was evidence of administration and trade links that connect it with other contemporary civilization. The downfall of Harappan civilization is still ambiguous and the next civilization that finds its way to the historical text is the Vedic civilization.

The Vedic age that spans almost a millennium of Indian history (C.1500 – 500 BC) is a period that witnessed crucial socio-political changes in north India. It is argued and believed that the Aryans migrated from West Asia into the Indian subcontinent in several stages or waves and are considered a different race from the non-Aryan Harappans of the preceding period. Historians believe that the new race of Aryans killed or forced the people of Harappan civilization to move toward the peninsular region of the subcontinent just like the Red Indian were forced to Migrate when Europeans invaded America.

History suggests that the Deccan culture is as old as the Harappan Civilization itself and dates back to 2300 BC. It is also known from history and anthropology that Dravidians were dusky while the new Aryan race was fair. The Aryan Race and the Dravidians both followed the 'Pagan' way of life and worshipped forces of nature which is now known as Hinduism. But traces of war between the Dravidians and the Aryans were found in the ancient texts. The Rigved, one of the major texts that evolved and was composed at that era repeatedly refers to hostilities and wars between different races. Historical evidence points that Harappan civilization underwent an attack from an outside force while Vedic texts prove that Aryans fought the existing race to take control of the green valleys of *Sapta Sindhu* the same story is retold in the Hindu mythology and are recorded in *Puranas*.

THE CASTE SYSTEM

Once the Aryan race built their new civilization in the northern plains of India they also developed a new culture, language and religion. Aryans believed in the *Varnashram* way of life that is a natural classification of duties performed according to the system of four *varnas* (social divisions) and four *ashrams* (stages in life). *Varnas* divided the society based on the occupation. *Varna* is from the root 'vri' which means choice according to inherent traits. *Varna* seems to have been the division of the society in the Rig Vedic times when there were four classes. These classes were *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*.

There are passages in the Vedic literature regarding the *Varnas*. There is a hymn in 'Purusha Sukta' of *Rig Veda* which says that the *Brahman Varna* represents the mouth of the *Purusha* or the universal man, *Kshatriya Varna* forms his arms, the *Vaishya* forms his thighs and the *Sudra*, his feet. The division into four *Varnas* is related to the duties assigned to each *Varna*. Accordingly, each *Varna* had to pursue a particular vocation.

It appears that the original part of the Vedas did not know about the caste system and the caste system came later on. In Vedic society, there was no restriction on an individual regarding a particular occupation. Persons belonging to a particular *Varna* could accept and practice any profession they liked. A Brahmin could take the profession of a physician. Similarly, there was no restriction regarding food, drinking or diet among *Varnas*. Besides, there were no restrictions on inter-marriage between the different classes of the Aryan race. Hence, the *Varnas* were open classes and not water-tight compartments. These classes were based on individual traits and not on birth.

In the Vedic tradition, *ashrama* means a stage in the life of a human being. Hindu tradition recognizes four stages or *ashramas* in human life, namely *brahmacharya*, *grihastha*, *vanaprastha* and *sanyasa*. Of these people had the option to enter into all the four or the first three. Not all people entered into the fourth stage.

The *brahmacharya* stage begins at childhood where the individual was supposed to go to *gurukul* to gain knowledge and enhance his mind and senses. The presiding deities of this stage were *Bramha* and *Saraswati*. The period falls approximately from the initiation

ceremony (*Upanayan*) until the end of the studentship. In old days, it usually began with the departure of the student to the house of his teacher following the *upanayanam* ceremony, which marked his birth as *dwija* or twice-born. During this period young children were expected to enter a *gurukul*, live there under the care of a *guru* or learned master and become educated in the Vedas and other scriptures. They were also expected to observe austerities like not taking bath with hot water, not using perfumes or ornaments, in addition to practicing complete celibacy. This was also the time during which a student became conversant with the academic aspects of dharma, the first *purushartha* of human life according to Hinduism.

After *Brahmacharya* begins *Grihasta* whose presiding deities were Vishnu and Lakshmi. Once a student returned to his home from the *gurukul* after completing his education, having developed his body and mind fully and became adept in the Vedic knowledge, he was entitled to get married and lead the life of a householder. He should work in order to increase the wealth of his family and pay the religious debts he owed to his father, ancestors, rishis and other beings. He should take care of his parents and grandparents, children and wife by performing necessary duties of a householder towards his family in addition to performing his social duties such as preservation of dharma and Varna, honouring the guests who came to the house and helping the poor and the needy. He should also perform religious ceremonies and make sacrificial offerings as prescribed by the scriptures. A householder pursued *artha* (second *purushartha*) and *kama* (third *purushartha*) in the prescribed manner during this period.

Once the individual enters the middle age it marks the end of his *grihastha ashram* and he enters the stage of *vanaprastha* where he was expected to leave *swagriha* and expected to live in forest dwellings to gain wisdom and to pray to the presiding deities of Shiva and Shakti. During this period a person was expected to move away from worldly matters and get himself ready for his spiritual journey to attain *moksha* (the fourth *purushartha*). He was to do this by delegating his duties to his children, leaving his family and possession behind and moving into a secluded place such as a hermitage or the forest. There he should live like an ascetic and spend his time practicing austerities, offering oblations, reciting the Vedas and the metaphysical treatises, and in the acquisition of the knowledge of the self. He should wear a garment made of cloth, skin or bark to cover his nakedness, wear his hair in braids, remain chaste, restrain his speech, actions and senses, subsist on wild growing roots, fruit and vegetables, honour the guests who visited his hermitage, give gifts but not receive any in return, bathe three times a day, promise safety to all beings and animals, sleep on the ground and so on. These observations were aimed at controlling one's mind, overcoming passions and developing detachment from the sense objects and preparing oneself for a more rigorous life as an ascetic or *sanyasi*.

Sanyas ashram is the final phase of human life during which a person should devote his life and activities in the pursuit of *moksha* (the fourth *purushartha*) or final liberation. According to Vashista Sutras in this stage a person should wear a single garment, sleep on the bare ground, frequently change his residence, dwell at the extremity of the

village, in a temple, or in an empty house, or at the root of a tree, constantly seek in his heart the knowledge of the universal soul. Should not wander about within sight of the village-cattle Should not wear any visible mark of his order or follow any visible rule of conduct because freedom from future births is certain for the one who constantly dwells in the forest, has subdued his organs of sensation and action, has renounced all sensual gratification, whose mind is fixed in meditation on the Supreme Spirit, and who is wholly indifferent to pleasure and pain. Each *varna* and *ashram* has its own specified *dharma*. What may be desirable for one *varna* may be degrading for another, for example, nonviolence is essential for the *Brahmins* but was considered unworthy of the *Kshatriyas*. Similarly generating wealth and producing children are essential for householders but not considered good for the *sanyasi* or a student.

DEVAS AND ASURAS

According to Hindu mythology, Devas and Asuras were two different races they share the same lineage and have the same father just like the whole humankind has a common origin. According to Hindu Mythology, the different life forms on earth had a common father Kashyap. Kashyap is one of the *Saptarishis* and the son of Brahma, the creator. Kashyap was married to thirteen daughters of *Prajapati* Daksha and his wife bore him different children. Vinata gave birth to *garudas*, birds and insects that fly. Kadru gave birth to *nagas*, slithering serpents and worms that crawl on earth. Sarama

bore wild creatures with claws and Surabhi bore gentle animals with hooves. Timi produced fishes and creatures that live in water. Surasa gave birth to monsters and Muni to *Apsaras* and Danu to *Danavas*. Aditi gave birth to the *Devas* and Diti gave birth to *Asuras*.

Devas and *Asuras* although share common ancestry but there is a deeply rooted rivalry among them. The cause of rivalry is that *Devas* abode is *Swarg* with *Amaravati* with its capital while *Asuras* are forced to stay in *Patalalok*. *Devas* are immortal because they drink *Amrita* the nectar that provides them immortality while *Asuras* know how to resurrect the dead by using the *Sanjeevani*. According to Hindu Mythology, any *Jiva* or living being is trapped in the cycle of births and rebirths and are trapped in the mesh of *Karma*. Human beings can become gods through righteous conduct and accumulating good *karma* similarly *Devas* could also be cursed and subjected to sufferings if they sin while an *Asura* can gain salvation if he is able to evoke the divine grace. Therefore in Hindu mythology, *Asuras* are not inherently evil like demons of Abrahamic religions and *Devas* are capable of showing cruelty and being evil.

The rituals and beliefs of society have a deep impact upon the literary works of the time and the epics of *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* is no different we know that these epics were written and compiled much later after the compilation of *Rigved* and the society was very different and underwent many changes since the completion of the first Veda. Therefore the class structure and the social description we find in these two epics are very different from what the *Rigved* tells us. The *varnashram dharma* was very different,

while initially the Vedic society was unaware of the caste system and allowed people of different caste to undertake any profession they like later the scene was completely different during the time of the *Rigved* caste system was based on the division of profession while later it was based on accident of birth. And throughout these two epics, we are told the same.

Mahabharat is also called the fifth Veda as it is the most valuable product of the entire literature of ancient India, an inexhaustible mine for the investigation of the religion, mythology, legend, philosophy, law, custom and socio-political institutions of ancient India. It explores human life in all its aspects of *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*. It uses different narrative techniques like parables, legends, subplots and fables to convey the message with *rasa* rather than presenting a simple dry commentary on the matter. And along with the scholarly traditions the parallel institution of *katha*, the *pravachan parampara* or the popular tradition of narration helped in fulfilling its role as the fifth Veda by dispatching the knowledge or aspect of *dharma* to common people through a mode comprehensible to men and women who otherwise may not have the intellectual capacity to unravel the wisdom contained in the four *Vedas*. Therefore the things told in these epics about *varna* and *dharma* remained with the people till modern times and the origin of the caste system was forgotten.

RAVAN IN *ASURA* AND SURPANAKHA IN *LANKA'S PRINCESS*

As noted earlier that history is told from the point of view of the winners the *Asura* race in *Ramayan* and the *Puranas* were always considered to be evil, proud and personifying the unwanted and negative characteristics. The *Ramayan* is always told as the story of Rama, the incarnation of Vishnu slaying Ravana, the evil demon of darkness and this version of the tale told by the victor is the one that lived through the pages of history. The voice of the vanquished remains lost in silence.

Anand Neelakantan being a Dalit writer himself could identify with the *Asura* clan and their forced silence and through his works of mythification tells their story. Ravana in this novel is the narrator telling us about his struggle to establish an empire. The retellings of *Ramayan* before had always glorified Rama and his actions and very conveniently overlooked the virtues of Ravana. In *Asura*, Neelakantan had done the opposite brought out virtues of Ravana and questioned certain actions of Rama that goes unquestioned before.

Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*, on the other hand, retells the story from the point of view of a minor character that is a woman and has always received hatred and nothing else from the people. While readers cannot ignore the grandeur of Ravan because of his status as a king Surpanakha fails to impress people even there because of her status as a woman. Surpanakha's story in certain sense represents the Dalit women's position where they are double oppressed because of their caste and because of their gender.

Both the novels strip the grand epic of its magical and fantastical grandeur and represents it as a story of simple human beings with flaws and weaknesses and question how right would be the actions of Ram and Laksman be considered had it not been for their façade of divinity, and how wrong were Ravan and his people.

Asura and *Lanka's Princess* questions if it is all right and chivalrous to kill and mutilate women (Tadaka, Surpanaka, Ayomuhki, Surasa, Simhika, Lankini and Chandrasena) in the name of taming the wild.

In *Lanka's Princess* Kane portrays how *dharma* is a double-edged sword that is used by the intellectuals to meet their own ends and not for a second take into consideration the concept of emotions. In the novel Laksmana is haunted by his act of killing a boy without weapons who was meditating not even for once did he feels guilty for mutilating a woman. *Lanka's Princess* also highlights how unwanted a girl child is made to feel in her own house especially if the household is facing poverty. The novel focuses on the issue of the girl child in the Indian household. While a boy is seen as the source to rid the family of poverty, a girl is considered a burden. The text explores how hard it becomes for a girl to survive while she not only faces oppression from the outside world but is also ignored and is unloved in her own family.

Surpanaka's actions are justified by tracing the unloved childhood she had and her fight to cling on to the only man who ever made her feel loved. The text is more like a message that often girls become victims of psychological oppression and this is more dangerous than physical ones because here the results or the marks are not usually

visible but corrodes the girl child from inside twisting her cognitive process and making her more vulnerable to duplicity.

She refused to see the faults of Vidytjiva because the illusion of feeling loved was more important to her than facing the truth; more because her grooming and upbringing where she's being ignored. Thus, she is not equipped with the inner strength necessary to value truth that is ugly, more than duplicity that is comforting. Also, it brings to light the harm that double oppression had caused to women. On one hand, women were not allowed to face the world and were kept within the household and then if they wanted to see the world the excuse given to them was it was for their own good to stay inside as they did not have any experience with the world.

Surpanakha made mistakes in trusting wrong people and doing things the wrong way because she had no experience with the world because of her over protective brothers. She is blamed for instigating Ravan but no one questions why Ravan listened to her when he himself was so intelligent. Surpanakha's flaws were never hidden in the text but an understanding as to why she acted in a certain way is provided. Also, it praises her manipulating skills and once again reminds the readers that every human be that a man or woman, Brahmin or Dalit finds their own way to bend the rules and achieve their goals.

Asura on the other hand as it is written by a Dalit writer himself gives detailed information about traditions and culture of the "others" their art and culture, history and architecture are explored in a beautiful fashion. *Asura* states how their customs

differ from that of the Brahmans and critics some of their customs in return. One, for example, being the custom of having a contest during *swayamvar* and how it undermines the very concept of giving the woman freedom to choose a husband for herself, the text questions how could a contest possibly decide a man's eligibility as a husband what is the guarantee that the most excellent archer or the most strong person will have the qualities it takes to be a good life partner.

I noticed that the princes and the kings assessed her like they had come to a cattle market and have found their prize cow. I burned with anger. What sort of custom was this? An innocent young girl in her prime exposed to the lustful eyes of old men who could win her in a contest? What about her feelings, her loves, her dreams and wishes? Any ruffian who has enough strength to lift that stupid bow could marry her. She would know none of the joy of courting her husband.....this was uncivilized.

AnandNeelakantan (2012) *Asura* (page 295-296)

It also sheds lights on the social evils and drawbacks of the Hindu society and their treatment of women that were easily ignored in the epic.

"Do you know how a Deva widow lives?" she asked in a whimper. I remained silent. "Do you know the choices a Deva widow has.... "We can live a slave's life in the house of our in-laws... with our heads shaven...hands and throats unadorned....purposefully made unattractive...a living corpse...no bindis for us....no bangles....no colored saris...only coarse white...no life...an unpaid servant...a living corpse...." You know I could jump into my husband's funeral pyre and become a Goddess...the virtuous Sati. Then the same people who would have treated me no better than an animal in life...would erect temples and worship me."

AnandNeelakantan (2012) *Asura* (page 216-217)

And on the much-heated discussion about Ram's *raj dharma* and *swadharma* and his decision to leave Ayodhya when the citizens of Ayodhya wanted him to stay and later his decision to cast Sita away because of the same citizens' wishes whose wishes he had ignored earlier.

I learned with dismay (It is dismays the reader to learn....) that Rama had thrown away his inheritance because his stepmother wanted her son to be the king. She had extracted a promise from Dasharatha that he would send away his eldest son to the wilderness for fourteen years and make her son, Bharata, king.

My son in law, the fool that he was, volunteered to abdicate his claim and vanished into the wilderness. Though the people of Ayodhya wanted Rama to be their king, he ignored the wishes of the masses to satisfy his henpecked father. I hated Rama for his false ego and eagerness to prove his self-righteousness to the world. I would never understand his logic. And how could his father have made such an unfair promise? A king could not act like that. It was against the Raja Dharma. As the heir, it was Rama's duty to rise against the king who had acted unjustly. He should have overthrown his father and assumed the kingship. Instead, he abdicated in favour of his stepbrother. And his other brother, Lakshmana, followed him into the wild. And now my beautiful daughter had been dragged along with them.

AnandNeelakantan (2012) *Asura* (page 300)

Apart from telling the tale of the defeated king Ravan, *Asura* also presents the perspective of a lowly subject- someone of no importance, the one from the masses who just exists but whose existence never matters in the history. One such person who

witness it all and plays his role but is never appreciated through the character of Bhadra a soldier in the mighty army of Lanka. It is ironical that the novel actually states that although it is the story of heroes who make it to the history through their acts of grandeur, it is through the help of small acts from the nobodies like Bhadra victory and lose is gained in a battle.

THE KAURAVAS IN *AJAYA* AND *RISE OF KALI*

Ajay and *Rise of Kali* uses the same technique as *Asura* and here Neelakantan presents the story of *Mahabharat* from the point of view of Duryodhan, Karna and other minor characters who had no voice in the original epic. Just like Bhadra in *Asura* here, the downtrodden *shudra* boy is Jara and through him and through Ekalavya who was a *Nishad* we get to know the abuse Dalits and untouchables and the lower caste faced in ancient India. While *Asura* is a story about two different races here it is about the different castes.

The authorship of the grand epic of *Mahabharat* is credited to Ved Vyas who is not only the narrator of the tale but is also a character of the epic and it is believed that Ved Vyas narrated the entire epic in one breath while Lord Ganesha wrote it down. The reason why Ved Vyas is supposed to tell the entire tale to Ganesha in one breath is believed so that he may not relate to the tale in a biased or partial way but would tell it impartially without favoring one side or character but clearly the epic favors the side led by the

avatar of Lord Vishnu, while the other side is ignored or doubted, even when they did good deeds.

Duryodhan is the character who led *Kauravas* being the eldest among the hundred and one siblings and throughout the epic is criticized for duplicity and for using unfair means to claim the throne of Hastinapur. One of the major differences between *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* is that in *Ramayana* most of the characters are incredibly ideal or at least have the façade of being ideal. And *Ramayana* is fantastical while *Mahabharat* seems more realistic even in the original text the characters are presented with flaws that the script doesn't try to hide. Moreover, *Mahabharat* presents the realistic picture of a war, complete with its aftermath and destruction that it had caused to both the sides. While the original text presents human life in shades of grey but retellings and traditional interpretations tends to paint the *Pandavas* in white and *Kauravas* in black and also focuses on it as just being the story of a great war of succession between two sets of cousins while it is more about shaping up of society and a source of how society was back then.

Ajaya presents the struggle of the lower caste to gain a life of honour and the struggle of untouchables and *mlechhas* to gain a life worth living, and presents the realistic picture of the society with the stagnant caste system and its dark outcomes. *Ajay* also praises Duryodhan for having a big heart. While traditional interpretations question his act of helping Karna and doubt this act of his as self-interest.

Neelakantan gives him the benefit of doubt and states maybe he was really not as bad as retellings and traditional interpretations make him. Neelakantan writes that his reason for giving Duryodhan a chance to clear his name is because of his visit to a festive that stayed with him for a long time and made him question if the traditional interpretations could be wrong. He writes that in Malanada Temple in Poruvazhy village in Kerala every year a grand celebration is held to pay respect and to worship the deity of that temple who is none other than Duryodhan himself. The legend goes that the temple was built by Duryodhan for the villagers and it had no idol and was built for the untouchables and *shudras* after one of the *shudra* women offered him water on a hot sunny day. The legends say that in ancient India royalty and upper castes considered it unlucky to even see an untouchable to touch them or have something offered by them was beyond question and if by any chance a person from upper caste came in contact with an untouchable that person has to go through a purification ritual. But Duryodhan has different thoughts on these matters and considered people from all class equal and believed in giving them a chance they deserved.

Moreover, Duryodhan's fight over the throne was not unethical because he too had a claim to the throne, perhaps more than Pandavas because of his bloodline. While he is the child of the ruling king Dhritarashtra, Pandavas were not related by blood to Pandu but claimed to have a divine origin which Duryodhan believed to be similar to present-day political propaganda used to fool a gullible public. It is also very much evident from the original text that caste system was indeed an issue in the past and talented

people were denied guidance and chance to prove them because of that – Karna and Ekalavya were proved of this and not even the original texts could ignore that Duryodhan provided them with a chance.

Furthermore, the original texts tell us that in the legendary battle of Kurukshetra, Kauravas had a greater number of allies and army and were overpowered only by the cunning and plotting of Lord Krishna. According to *Udyoga Parvan*, the combined number of warriors and soldiers in both armies was approximately four million, divided in *Akshauhini* which included 21,870 chariots and chariot riders, 21,870 elephants and riders, 65, 6160 horses and riders and 109,350-foot soldiers in a ratio of 1:1:3:5. The size of Pandavas' army in the war was 7 akshauhinis, and those of Kauravas 11 akshauhinis. The question to be asked is why four million people from all over India were willing to kill or die in a simple war of succession or why the greater proportion of the people choose to side with Kauravas if they were indeed wrong and evil and had no legitimate claim to support their succession to the throne.

“This young man is proof that talent knows no caste. There are forces in our society that want to cloister everything, corner every privilege, and treat others like dust under their feet. But what is his crime? He wanted to learn. Now Parashuram's followers want us to punish a man for daring to dream; to insult him for not being born into a higher caste. Is this right thing to do? Have we ever paused to think what will happen to this land if we keep denying knowledge to everyone? The majority live in ignorance and poverty. A few decide who is pure and who is not. Which are this scripture these people quote? Why are they afraid to let everyone learn the Vedas? Are they afraid that the people will then see that

most of the taboos and inhuman practices they advice have no sanction in the holy books? Where are these people leading our country? Has the time not come to say – enough!”

AnandNeelakantan (2013) *Ajaya* (page 262-263)

And if the Pandavas were really as saintly as are usually believed. Did they not knowingly and willingly murder a *nishad* woman with her five sons in Varanavat in the house of lac to create confusion and to remain in hiding?

Arjuna knew he was defeated. He was a mere warrior, whereas his eldest brother was a learned man. He never uttered a lie, and all the Brahmins hailed him as the epitome of virtue and righteousness. Arjuna left the room, confused about the whole concept of *dharma*. Maybe one day someone would explain things to him clearly, so he would not feel the pinch of his conscience in doing what his mother suggested. He could hear the gentle snoring of the nishada woman. Arjuna stood staring at the Ganga flowing in the distance, trying to ignore his thoughts about a poor mother and her five children who had trusted them. Arjuna struggled with the impossible tangle of right and wrong. His brother and mother’s argument made no sense to him, it only creates immense sadness in his confused mind.

AnandNeelakantan (2013) *Ajaya* (page 306-307)

THE FINAL THOUGHT

All these retellings of the twenty-first century ponder over the traditional interpretation of the texts and help us to think how much can we believe in the interpretations given by others over centuries. Also, the retellings help us to understand how society changes very slowly and accepts progress.

It is explained through the example of Shambuka who was beheaded by Rama because he was a *shudra* who committed the crime of doing *Tapasya*. This was the *Dwaparyug* the yug preceding *Tretayug* where caste role was fixed and anyone who tried to break free of the same was killed and these killings were accepted as normal. The scenario in the next yug was somewhat different although Karna and Ekalavya were never praised for their effort to break free of the caste they were born into; the society did not sanction their outright killings. *Mahabharat* presents us a society more corrupt and more accepting of fluidity in the traditional Brahmanical society. While the *Avatar* of Vishnu who is the preserver prevented any fluidity in *Dwaparyug* actually helped and plotted to change the orthodox outlook in the next *Yug*.

Asura helps us to understand the initial clash between the races of Dravidians and Aryans as told in history books where Dravidians were forced to migrate to the south just like *Asura* were supposed to live in *Patalalok*. It is interesting to notice that *pataal* is always described to be situated southward while the location of *Amaravati* is in the north, also the skin color of *Asuras* are supposed to be dark as compared to *Devas* who were fair in complexion.

Another interesting reference the novel refers to is the architecture mentioned in the epics somehow Lanka and Indraprastha both having extraordinary architectural style was made by *Aruras* and somehow the architectural style of south India matches the

description. Furthermore, Neelakantans description about a race more indulgent in art and culture, more advanced in their time invaded by a race of barbarians matches the history of Aryans and Dravidians.

Ajaya is more into questioning the caste system and the ethics displayed by both sides and reveals that the façade of maintaining *dharma* is dropped and the supposed *dharmayuddha* degenerates into *adharmayuddha* where both sides break rules in the heat of battle when victory and the throne of an empire are at the stake.

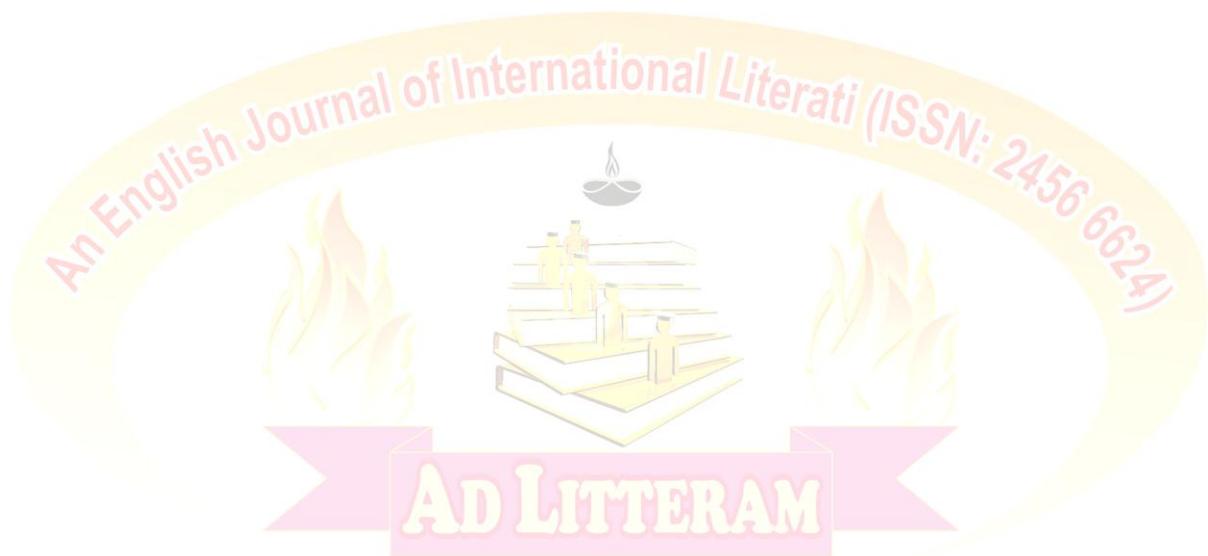
These retellings together also urge us to ponder how important the element of sublime and fantasy is in any mythological retellings and what power they have to transform a human into God because when the element of sublime and fantasy is sapped out of the tales, these merely become tales of politics, where the supposed God or his avatar is nothing but a skilled orator and manipulator who knows how to bend rules in his favor. It also represents how an idea becomes immortal and the person associated with the idea through retellings of the tale becomes God. The element of sublime and the idea of divinity play an important role in making people understand a thing or to spread an idea. When the concept of divinity is attached to a thing people fails to question it and accept the doings even if it is disturbing to logical mind without question as destiny or fate. Both Rama and Krishna had done many things in the epics that should be considered wrong ethically by the logical mind but due to their status as god, their doings were accepted by the people and society in general.

The doings of Drona are never questioned when he asked for Ekalavya's thumb as his *gurudakshina* even when he never taught the boy because of his caste as a *nishad*. Arjuna is considered to be the best archer even when he had tough competitors in both Karna and Ekalavya. Yudhisthir is never condemned in his life and was the only one to reach the gates of heaven because only he is considered to have fulfilled all his dharma and the fact that he was the son of Yama the keeper of gates of heaven is always overlooked.

Moreover, the novels tell us that war had the power to make people's character. the side who won had the power to write the story his own way but although for a time being the story of the other side will remain lost in history it will not be lost forever. There is always another side of the coin and similarly, every story has its own story which will remain inside the clan who lost for a time being and will come out when a new era has arrived where the winning side no longer controls the flow of idea and thought.

More importantly, they tell that great deeds never go unnoticed ever in history and therefore along with the winners the losers are also always mentioned as although they lost the war but nonetheless had shown greatness and are therefore remembered. The only true loss is the lost voices of the commoner who live their life without grandeur

whose contribution decides the fate of war but their contribution fades before the leaders whose tales are told with the element of sublime.



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