

# **Reshaping History: A Subaltern Perspectives of Anand Neelakantanon Indian Epics**

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## **Abstract:**

*Anand Neelakantan is an Indian author known for his contributions to the historical fiction genre, his novels offer alternative or antagonist perspective on traditional Indian mythological stories. He was born in Kerala, India, Neelakantan has a background in finance. The objective of this research is to foster a comprehensive understanding of Anand Neelakantan's literary contributions, his reception in the literary world, and the broader implications of reimagining mythological narratives. Scholars, students, and enthusiasts of Indian literature will find this research to be an enriching for the exploration of alternative narratives and the evolving landscape of Indian storytelling and has worked in various capacities in the corporate world. He gained widespread recognition with his debut novel, "Asura: Tale of the Vanquished," which presents the epic Ramayana from the perspective of Ravana. The book challenges the traditional portrayal of Ravana as a villain and offers a more nuanced view of his character. Following the success of "Asura," Anand Neelakantan continued to explore similar themes in his subsequent works. "Ajaya: Roll of the Dice" This book and its sequel, "Ajaya: Rise of Kali," provide an alternate perspective on the Mahabharata, narrating the story from the viewpoint of Duryodhana, often considered the antagonist in the original epic. "The Rise of Sivagami" (Bahubali Series): Neelakantan was commissioned to write this book as a prequel to the blockbuster Indian film "Bahubali." The novel explores the origin story of Sivagami, a pivotal character in the movie. "Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva, and Tara": This novel delves into the lesser-explored characters from the Ramayana, focusing on the lives of the Vanaras, including Baali, Sugreeva, and Tara. Anand Neelakantan's works are known for challenging conventional narratives and providing a fresh perspective on well-known mythological and historical tales. His storytelling style incorporates rich details, complex characters, and a deep understanding of Indian cultural and mythological traditions.*

## **Introduction**

In this research paper, we are going to study the subaltern view of Anand Neelakantan into the selected fictional novels namely "Asura: Tale of the Vanquished" (2012), "Ajaya: The Roll of the Dice" (2013), "The Rise of Sivagami" (2017), and "Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara" (2018). Anand Neelakantan stands out as a profound writer whose debut novel, "Asura: Tale of Vanquished," attracts and holds the interest of readers. Reshaping the history from the perspective of the marginalized seeks to highlight the consciousness of subaltern groups across various contexts and periods. "Subaltern studies" represent a contemporary approach to historical writing, alongside other trends such as Imperialism, Primitivism, Nationalism, Marxism, Neo-Marxism, Feminism, and Ambedkarism. There's a growing call to rewrite and reassess history narratives to better incorporate diverse voices and experiences. Unlike conventional mythical retellings, Neelakantan's narratives offer a subaltern viewpoint, delving into the marginalized perspectives often overlooked in traditional interpretations. "Asura Tale of Vanquished," in particular, presents the Ramayana saga from Ravana's lens, challenging the dominant narrative upheld by history's victors.

The timeless battle between good and evil depicted in the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the narrative of Hero triumph over the formidable villain has been told and retold countless times. However, what sets Neelakantan's rendition apart is his skillful portrayal of Ravana, Duryodhana and Bali in different perspectives. While history often favors the victor's account, Neelakantan's work challenges this norm by offering readers a thought-provoking alternative interpretation.

### Objective

We know the history which is being told to us through ancient epics by ancestors. We still believe into the view of hero of these epics. It is hard to change the perception of common people towards these epics but there are some writers who think differently and rewrite the historic novels to give a second thought by presenting the view of the defeated side or marginalized people or antihero or villain etc. Our aim in this research is to show how Anand Neelakantan described the antagonist view of antiheroes through his Novels.

### Subaltern view of Anand Neelakantan

**Asura The Tale of Vanquished** is the first novel of Neelakantan. This novel gained popularity as it is describing the Ramayana from the view of Ravana. The novel sheds light on the positive aspects of Ravana's character. Despite his infamous act of abducting Sita, Ravana is portrayed as a devoted follower of Shiva, a highly knowledgeable scholar, a skilled musician, and an adept astrologer. The narrative emphasizes that beyond his moment of folly, Ravana was a revered and benevolent ruler who was adored by his people until the devastating war initiated by Rama and his allies.

Amish Tripathi elaborates Ravana's intelligence in his book *Raavan Enemy of Aryavarta* 2019

*"He was seven years old now and already renowned in many ashrams, besides that of his father's as a brilliant child with a formidable intellect. He had started his training in the martial arts as well and was already showing great promise. As if that wasn't enough, he had a keen ear for music too. His favorite were the signed instruments, especially the magnificent Rudra Veena. It was only a few months since he had started learning to play the veena, but he was already in love with it."*

The author observes that the asuras, including Ravana, maintained a democratic society without caste distinctions, with Lord Shiva as their patron deity, suggesting a historical lineage tracing back to the Dravidians rather than the Aryans. Consequently, Ravana emerges as a character devoid of typical villainous traits. The depiction of Ravana with ten heads is reinterpreted by the author to represent human emotions or actions, dispelling the demonic connotation associated with his appearance. *Asura* is the story of two people Ravana and Bhadra a common man in Ravana kingdom,

Bhadra, a loyal but impoverished Asura plays a significant role in the story faithfully serving his king despite frequent misunderstandings from Ravana. The novel primarily revolves around these two characters and their differing perspectives on life, race, culture and their homeland. While Ravana's narrative delves into the life of a king and the dynamics of ruling a kingdom, Bhadra's storyline illuminates the struggles of an ordinary person trying to survive in a challenging world. Contrary to the traditional depiction of Ravana as a fearsome 'Rakshasa,' the novel portrays him as a regular human being navigating the complexities of life. Despite his arrogance and lack of belief in gods, Ravana embodies the belief that determination and hard work can lead anyone to achieve their goals. Ravana stands out as a character who acknowledges his wrongdoings and actively seeks forgiveness from his subjects. Yet he retains the dignity and pride befitting the ruler of Lanka. In contrast Bhadra represents the voice of the common folk caught amidst the conflicts involving heroes and rulers. The novel presents historical events such as Sita's abduction and the battle in Lanka from the intriguing perspectives of both Ravana and Bhadra.

**Ajaya The Roll of Dice and Ajaya the Rise of Kali** are the two novels of Anand Neelkanth in a series with the same antagonist perspective or subaltern view.

In the novel "Ajaya," the Mahabharata is narrated through the perspective of Duryodhana with the Kauravas portrayed as the central figures. While the story's general outline is familiar to most this retelling offers a fresh perspective focusing specifically on the epic of the Kauravas clan. The author presents a nuanced portrayal of Indian society depicting two distinct factions the traditional camp, led by figures such as Parshuram, Krishna,

Kunti, Dhaumya, Dronacharya and the Pandavas, and the liberal faction led by Bhishmacharya, Vidur, Jarasandha, Balram and the Kauravas. This conflict between the two camps reflects deeper societal divisions with the liberals advocating for less rigid caste and class systems while the conservatives uphold traditional hierarchies. Additionally, the novel introduces other ideological groups, such as the communists led by Nagas and other marginalized individuals who fight for the rights of the underprivileged often resorting to extreme measures. There's also a traitorous faction led by Shakuni exemplified by characters like Karna and Eklavya who possess exceptional abilities but face discrimination due to their lower caste status. One intriguing concept introduced by the author is the alliance between the ultra-conservative Southern Confederate commanded by Parshuram, and Hastinapur led by Bhishmacharya. This alliance highlights the growing influence of Parshuram's followers within Hastinapur signaling a shift towards stricter caste and class systems.

The characterization in the narrative is both unique and captivating. Krishna is depicted as cunning and determined to maintain the caste system, while Yudhishtir exhibits courtesy towards everyone except the Kauravas. Bhim is portrayed as a tyrant, while Kunti and Gandhari vie for control of the throne, striving to secure their sons' succession. Duryodhana is portrayed as both compassionate and perplexed, while Shakuni is depicted as a scheming villain. Karna emerges as a noble figure who champions the cause of the underprivileged, while Ekalavya is portrayed as a talented individual searching for purpose. Kripacharya is portrayed as a renegade academic who opposes the caste system, while Dronacharya is depicted as the epitome of a high-ranking Brahmin. Balram is portrayed as a liberal dreamer, and Bhishmacharya is depicted as a balanced individual seeking gradual societal improvement.

Takshak the leader of the Nagas claims to represent the oppressed while Jara a beggar who frequently appears in the novel plays a significant role in advancing the plot. Duryodhana's reluctance to fight Arjun for Subhadra, as well as his refusal to wage war on the Pandavas after Draupadi's insult in Hastinapur, highlight his character's complexity. According to the author there was a love affair between Subhadra, Duryodhana and the author but Subhadra ultimately eloped with Arjun leaving Duryodhana heartbroken. However, the reasons behind Subhadra's change of heart are left unexplained by the author. The author also glosses over how Krishna convinced Draupadi to marry five different men. Duryodhana dismisses the Pandavas' claim to the kingdom on the grounds that they are Kunti's lovers rather than Pandu's legitimate sons. However this rationale is flawed, as it overlooks the fact that if the Pandavas have no claim, neither does Dhritarashtra who was not Shantanu's biological child, having been born to Vichitravirya.

**Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara** is the next book in the series with the same theme and plot. It is a retelling of the ancient Indian epic Ramayana from the perspective of the vanaras the monkey-like figure who played significant roles in the original story. The book primarily focuses on three central characters Baali, Sugreeva and Tara.

Baali is the mighty and valiant king of the vanaras rules the kingdom of Kishkindha with strength and wisdom. However, his reign faces challenges when Sugreeva his younger brother desires to share the throne. The ensuing conflict leads to a fierce battle between the brothers resulting in Baali's defeat and Sugreeva's ascension to the throne.

Tara, Baali's wife stands by her husband's side throughout the turmoil offering support and guidance. After Baali's demise she forms a close bond with Sugreeva, becoming his trusted advisor and companion. The narrative explores themes of loyalty, betrayal and redemption as it delves into the intricate relationships between the characters. It offers a fresh perspective on the Ramayana, shedding light on the lesser-known aspects of the epic through the eyes of the vanaras.

**Some of the qualities of Baali are described below.**

**Bravery:** Baali was known for his incredible courage and physical strength. He was considered one of the most formidable warriors of his time. His bravery is evident in his many battles and confrontations.

**Loyalty:** Baali was a loyal brother to Sugriva another character in the Ramayana. Despite their differences and conflicts Baali remained committed to his brother's welfare and this loyalty is a positive trait.

**Leadership:** Baali was the king of the Kishkindha kingdom and was respected by his subjects. His leadership qualities were evident in the way he ruled his kingdom and protected his people.

**Wisdom:** Baali was not just a warrior but also was a wise and learned individual. He had knowledge of scriptures and was considered a scholar in various fields.

**Protective:** Baali had a protective nature especially when it came to his family and kingdom. He was willing to go to great lengths to ensure the safety and well-being of his loved ones.

**Fairness:** While his actions may not always be seen as just, Baali believed in maintaining a sense of fairness and righteousness. He was known to follow a code of ethics in his actions and decisions.

**Rise of Shivgami :** Anand Neelakantan's Sivagami trilogy begins with The Rise of Sivagami. Rajmata Sivagami, the warrior mother, is a strong, moral woman whose life is portrayed in this book. She is expelled from her father's kingdom and, in a dramatic turn of circumstances, returns to Mahishmathi. The story starts with her youth and follows a sequence of events leading up to this point. Many obstacles, like as cunning plots and fearsome enemies, stand in the way of Sivagami's grandiose mission to conquer Mahishmati. The plot also provides insight into Katappa, a major character who plays a crucial part in Amarendra Baahubali's downfall in the film. His service and subsequent acts shape the course of events, even if they seem insignificant at first in the demise of Mahishmathi Katappa's beginnings.

### Conclusion

Subaltern studies emerged as a groundbreaking approach to writing history within the framework of Indian history. Traditional historical narratives have often been criticized for being one-sided and incomplete and they fail to accurately depict the experiences of marginalized groups within society. This approach highlights the voices and experiences of those who have been historically overlooked or oppressed. It challenges the notion that history is solely shaped by the actions of great individuals or intellectual elites, emphasizing instead that true history emerges from the collective experiences of common people.

In the past decade, Indian English literature has witnessed a surge in exceptional works, giving rise to new literary trends such as feminist writing, diasporic writing, magical realism, and mythological fiction. This paper focuses on the literary contributions of Anand Neelakantan, who sheds light on marginalized individuals through his mythological fiction. Growing up in Kerala, Anand was immersed in a culture where mythology holds a significant place, contributing to the rich tapestry of Indian literature. The Hindu myths particularly the legendary epics The Ramayana and Mahabharata have always held a revered position in Indian literature shaping ethical values and cultural ethos. These timeless epics along with other Hindu mythological tales serve as a wellspring of inspiration for countless writers across India. The influence of mythology is pervasive in Indian literature permeating through various genres and themes explored by writers.

In Anand Neelakantan's selected works, we delve into Hindu traditions, cultural nuances mythological narratives ancient politics, and the intricacies of caste and creed. Through his writing Anand illuminates the complexities and dynamics of Indian society offering readers a deeper understanding of its multifaceted layers.

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