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## Myth and Subversion in Anand Neelakantan's Fiction

**Abstract :** Myth has remained an important source of cultural memory and literary imagination in Indian literature. In contemporary Indian fiction in English, traditional myths are frequently revisited, reinterpreted, and presented from perspectives different from those found in established narratives. Anand Neelakantan is one of the significant contemporary Indian writers who uses mythology to question dominant versions of the past. His novels *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*, and *Ajaya: Rise of Kali* revisit the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* through the voices of characters who have traditionally remained outside the centre of the narrative. Rather than rejecting myth, Neelakantan enters its familiar narrative structure and creates alternative interpretations of characters, events, morality, caste, power, and social hierarchy. His fiction therefore becomes an important site for the subversion of established myths and the creation of counter-narratives. This paper examines how Neelakantan reimagines myth by shifting narrative attention from the traditional heroes to the supposedly defeated, marginalised, or morally controversial characters. *Asura* presents the story of Ravana and Bhadra from an alternative perspective, while the *Ajaya* novels foreground Duryodhana and other figures associated with the Kaurava side of the *Mahabharata*. The study argues that Neelakantan's fictional strategy challenges the binary opposition between good and evil and encourages readers to question inherited assumptions about history, morality, social identity, and power. His treatment of myth also raises questions concerning caste, patriarchy, political authority, and the voices that remain absent from canonical narratives.

**Keywords:** Myth, Subversion, Anand Neelakantan, Indian English Fiction, Counter-Narrative, Marginality, Myth Reinterpretation.

**Introduction :** Myth occupies a central position in Indian

cultural and literary traditions. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are not merely ancient stories but living cultural texts that have influenced Indian society, religious imagination, ethical values, political thought, theatre, cinema, television, folk traditions, and modern literature. Their characters and episodes continue to be reinterpreted by writers in different historical and social contexts. Every new interpretation brings the possibility of discovering meanings that may remain hidden in conventional readings.

Contemporary Indian English fiction has made particularly significant use of mythology. Writers have increasingly returned to epic narratives not simply to reproduce them but to question, reinterpret, and sometimes subvert their established meanings. This process allows literature to examine the relationship between myth and power. A traditional myth generally presents a particular moral or social order, but a contemporary writer may ask whose perspective created that order and whose voice was excluded from it.

Anand Neelakantan occupies an important place in this literary movement. His fictional works challenge readers to reconsider familiar epic narratives. Instead of narrating the stories primarily through the perspectives of Rama, Krishna, or the Pandavas, Neelakantan turns his attention towards figures such as Ravana, Bhadra, Duryodhana, and other characters associated with the defeated or morally questioned side of the epic traditions.

His novels *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012), *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* (2013), and *Ajaya: Rise of Kali* (2015) demonstrate his sustained engagement with myth and alternative perspectives. His approach is not simply a modern retelling of mythology. It is an attempt to disturb the certainty associated with familiar narratives. The reader is encouraged to look at the same events from another angle and to recognise that moral judgement may depend upon the position from which a story is narrated.

The present paper examines the relationship between myth and subversion in Anand Neelakantan's fiction. It particularly focuses on the ways in which he uses alternative narration, marginalised voices, and morally complex characters to challenge established interpretations of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The paper also explores the representation of caste, patriarchy, political power, and social inequality in his fictional world.

**Objective of the Study :** To examine the reinterpretation of Indian myths in Anand Neelakantan's fiction and analyse how his alternative narratives challenge conventional representations of epic characters, morality, power, caste, gender, and social hierarchy in contemporary contexts.

**Research Question :** How does Anand Neelakantan reinterpret Indian myths, and how do his alternative narratives subvert conventional representations of epic characters, morality, power, caste, gender, and social hierarchy in contemporary society?

**Research Methodology :** The present study adopts a **qualitative and analytical research methodology** to examine the reinterpretation and subversion of Indian myths in Anand Neelakantan's fiction. The study is primarily based on **textual analysis** of his selected novels, particularly *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*, and *Ajaya: Rise of Kali*. These primary texts are examined closely to understand the representation of mythological characters, alternative narrative perspectives, morality, power, caste, gender, and social hierarchy. The study also uses a **comparative approach** to identify differences between conventional epic representations and Neelakantan's fictional reinterpretations. Secondary sources, including books, research articles, scholarly essays, and critical studies on mythology, Indian English fiction, narrative theory, and cultural studies, are consulted to develop the theoretical framework. The research employs concepts of **myth criticism, counter-narrative, subversion, marginality, and power relations** for textual interpretation. The study does not

attempt to establish the historical truth of the epics; rather, it investigates how mythology is creatively reconstructed to question dominant cultural assumptions and provide alternative perspectives in contemporary Indian fiction in English.

**Review of Literature :** The reinterpretation of Indian mythology has received significant attention in contemporary literary and cultural studies. Indian epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* continue to be retold from different social, cultural, and ideological perspectives. R. K. Narayan's *The Ramayana* provides a modern prose retelling of the epic, demonstrating how traditional mythology can acquire contemporary literary meaning. Romila Thapar's *Shakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories* examines changing representations of myth across textual and historical contexts, showing that myths are not fixed narratives. Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* highlights the plurality and moral complexity of the *Mahabharata* and provides a useful framework for understanding alternative interpretations of epic characters. Vinayak Chaturvedi's *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* contributes to discussions of marginality, representation, and subaltern perspectives, while Pramod K. Nayar's *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* offers theoretical insights into identity, power, and representation.

Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*, *Ajaya: Rise of Kali*, *Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara*, and *Valmiki's Women* significantly contribute to contemporary mythological fiction. These works question conventional representations by foregrounding marginalised and morally complex voices. However, comparatively limited attention has been given to myth and subversion across Neelakantan's *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*-based fiction. The present study addresses this gap by analysing alternative narratives, caste, gender, morality, power, and social hierarchy within contemporary Indian English fiction and criticism.

**Myth and Contemporary Indian Fiction :** Myth is not simply a story about gods, kings, heroes, or supernatural events. It is also a cultural framework through which societies understand morality, identity, authority, and social relationships. Myths often preserve collective memories and provide models of acceptable behaviour. However, myths are also flexible. They can be retold according to changing historical circumstances.

Modern and contemporary writers therefore approach mythology with both respect and critical distance. They retain recognisable characters and events while changing the narrative perspective. Such rewriting can reveal contradictions within the original or conventional interpretation.

The subversion of myth does not necessarily mean destroying or rejecting mythology. It can mean questioning its dominant interpretation. When a writer gives a voice to a character traditionally presented as a villain, the reader is asked to reconsider the category of villainy itself. Similarly, when a defeated character becomes the narrator, victory and defeat may acquire different meanings.

This method is particularly relevant in a diverse society such as India, where the same myth can have different meanings for different communities and regions. A character considered heroic in one tradition may be viewed critically in another. Contemporary fiction makes use of this plurality to create alternative literary spaces.

**Anand Neelakantan and the Reinterpretation of Myth :** Anand Neelakantan's major contribution to contemporary mythological fiction lies in his willingness to shift the centre of the narrative. His novels do not completely abandon the traditional epic framework. Instead, they work from within that framework and alter its perspective.

In *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, Ravana becomes a central figure. In the traditional

*Ramayana* tradition, Ravana is commonly identified as the antagonist who abducts Sita and ultimately loses his kingdom and life. Neelakantan, however, presents Ravana as a complex political and social figure. Alongside Ravana, Bhadra provides another important perspective. Bhadra is not a conventional epic hero; he represents the ordinary and socially marginalised individual who experiences political events from below.

The *Ajaya* novels adopt a similar strategy with the *Mahabharata*. Duryodhana, normally remembered as the principal antagonist of the Pandavas, becomes the centre of the narrative. Through Duryodhana and other Kaurava-associated characters, Neelakantan questions the assumption that the Pandavas represent absolute righteousness while the Kauravas represent absolute evil.

Thus, Neelakantan's fiction creates what may be called a counter-narrative. It does not necessarily claim that the alternative perspective is the only correct version. Instead, it demonstrates that epic narratives can be understood from multiple positions.

***Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*** : *Asura* is perhaps Neelakantan's most direct engagement with the subversion of a dominant mythological narrative. The novel retells the *Ramayana* largely from the perspective of Ravana and Bhadra.

The title itself is significant. The term "Asura" generally carries negative associations in conventional mythological discourse. Neelakantan, however, asks readers to consider the Asura not simply as an evil being but as a social and political subject. The novel therefore destabilises the traditional division between Deva and Asura, good and evil, civilised and uncivilised.

Ravana is presented as an intelligent, ambitious, powerful, and politically complex individual. His actions are not completely justified, but neither are they presented through a simple moral framework. This complexity is important because subversion becomes effective when the writer refuses to replace one absolute judgement with another.

Bhadra's perspective is equally important. He represents the ordinary individual caught within the struggles of kings, rulers, armies, and political powers. Through him, the epic conflict becomes a social experience rather than merely a battle between heroic figures.

The novel thus shifts attention from the royal and divine characters to the people affected by their decisions. War is no longer only a heroic event; it also becomes an experience of suffering, displacement, hunger, fear, and political uncertainty.

**The Subversion of Ravana** : The reinterpretation of Ravana is central to Neelakantan's literary project. Traditional representations often establish Ravana as the embodiment of evil. Neelakantan complicates this image by presenting his achievements, ambitions, contradictions, and failures.

Ravana's political authority is not shown as entirely meaningless. At the same time, his personal weaknesses and excessive ambition are not ignored. This balanced representation creates a morally ambiguous character.

Such ambiguity is one of the important features of contemporary fiction. The modern reader is often less interested in characters who are completely good or completely evil. Instead, contemporary literature explores how individuals become shaped by social structures, political circumstances, personal desires, and historical conflicts.

Neelakantan's Ravana therefore becomes more than an epic villain. He becomes a literary device through which the writer asks whether history is always written from the perspective of the victorious. The defeat of Ravana does not necessarily make every aspect of his character evil, just as the victory of Rama does not automatically remove all complexity from the opposing side.

***Ajaya: Roll of the Dice and the Kaurava Perspective*** : The subversive strategy becomes even

more visible in *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*. The novel moves into the world of the *Mahabharata* and places Duryodhana at the centre.

Duryodhana has traditionally been remembered as ambitious, jealous, cruel, and responsible for the suffering of the Pandavas. Neelakantan does not simply transform him into a perfect hero. Instead, he examines the reasons behind his actions and his relationship with power, friendship, caste, and political authority.

One of the significant aspects of Duryodhana's characterisation is his relationship with Karna. Karna's social marginalisation and Duryodhana's acceptance of him are important to the novel's exploration of caste and social status. The friendship between the two becomes more than a personal relationship; it also becomes a challenge to a rigid social hierarchy.

The novel therefore creates an alternative understanding of Duryodhana. His actions remain morally questionable, but the reader is encouraged to understand the social and political conditions that influence his decisions.

**Caste and Social Hierarchy :** Caste is one of the important concerns that emerges from Neelakantan's engagement with mythology. Epic narratives contain characters whose social positions raise questions about birth, status, merit, and access to power.

Karna is particularly significant in this context. His identity and social position make him an important figure for examining the relationship between talent and caste hierarchy. Neelakantan's treatment of Karna contributes to a broader questioning of a society in which social identity can determine opportunities and recognition.

Duryodhana's support for Karna can therefore be read as part of the novel's wider engagement with social exclusion. At the same time, the novel does not present political alliances as completely pure or selfless. Power and friendship remain intertwined.

This complexity strengthens the subversive nature of the narrative. Neelakantan does not simply create a new hero and a new villain. Instead, he creates a space in which readers can reconsider the social structures behind familiar epic events.

**Gender and Patriarchy :** The rewriting of myth also provides an opportunity to reconsider the representation of women. Traditional epic narratives frequently place women within patriarchal social structures, even though several women characters demonstrate considerable intelligence, courage, and agency.

Neelakantan's fictional world draws attention to the political dimensions of women's lives. Women are often connected to questions of marriage, family honour, political alliances, sexuality, and social expectations.

The figure of Draupadi is particularly important in the *Mahabharata* tradition. Her humiliation and subsequent political consequences demonstrate the relationship between gender and power. A contemporary retelling can make readers question why women are so often positioned as symbols of honour while their own desires and voices are restricted.

Through such reinterpretation, myth becomes a means of examining continuing social questions. The ancient narrative is connected to contemporary concerns about patriarchy, gender inequality, and female agency.

**Myth as Counter-Narrative :** The most significant achievement of Neelakantan's fiction is perhaps his creation of counter-narratives. A counter-narrative does not merely tell a different story; it questions the authority of the dominant story.

In conventional epic narration, the victorious side often receives greater moral legitimacy. Neelakantan reverses this structure by allowing the defeated side to speak. Ravana and Duryodhana are therefore not simply characters; they are narrative positions.

This strategy makes the reader aware of the power of narration itself. Who tells the story?

Whose suffering is remembered? Whose actions are judged? Who becomes a hero and who becomes a villain? These questions lie at the heart of Neelakantan's fictional project.

The importance of his work is therefore not limited to mythology. His novels also raise broader questions about history and representation. In political and social life, dominant groups frequently possess greater control over the production of narratives. Literature can challenge this control by bringing suppressed or alternative perspectives into visibility.

**Subversion Without Complete Rejection :** It is important to note that Neelakantan does not completely reject Indian mythology. His novels depend upon the reader's familiarity with the epics. The emotional and intellectual force of the novels comes from the tension between the familiar narrative and its alternative representation.

This means that his fiction operates through both continuity and disruption. Characters remain recognisable, but their motivations are reconsidered. Major events remain familiar, but their consequences are viewed from different social positions.

The result is a dialogue between tradition and modernity. Myth survives, but its meaning changes. The contemporary writer becomes an interpreter rather than merely a transmitter of tradition.

**Moral Ambiguity and the Humanisation of Characters :** Another important feature of Neelakantan's fiction is the humanisation of characters who have traditionally been judged in absolute terms. Ravana and Duryodhana are given fears, ambitions, friendships, weaknesses, and contradictions.

This humanisation makes the reader question the simple opposition between hero and villain. A character can perform both admirable and destructive actions. Similarly, political decisions can contain both idealism and self-interest.

Such moral ambiguity is particularly relevant to contemporary literature because it reflects the complexity of human behaviour. Neelakantan's characters are not presented merely as symbols of good or evil; they are individuals shaped by circumstances.

The literary significance of this technique lies in its ability to make ancient myths relevant to modern readers. Instead of treating myth as a fixed moral lesson, the novelist treats it as a continuing conversation.

**Political Power and the Question of Justice :** Power is another central theme in Neelakantan's fictional reinterpretations. The epics contain kingdoms, dynasties, wars, alliances, political strategies, and struggles for legitimacy. By shifting the narrative perspective, Neelakantan exposes the political dimensions behind moral claims.

Duryodhana's struggle for authority, for instance, can be read not only as a conflict between good and evil but also as a conflict over succession, legitimacy, social identity, and political influence.

Similarly, Ravana's conflict with Rama can be viewed through questions of empire, territorial authority, cultural difference, and political ambition.

This does not mean that Neelakantan denies ethical responsibility. Rather, he makes ethical judgement more complicated by placing characters within concrete political circumstances.

**Relevance to Contemporary Indian Society :** Neelakantan's reinterpretation of mythology is relevant because many issues represented in the epics continue to exist in contemporary society. Caste discrimination, social exclusion, political competition, patriarchy, inequality, and the struggle for recognition remain significant concerns.

The rewriting of myth enables these issues to be examined through culturally familiar characters. Readers may recognise contemporary social questions within ancient narratives.

This is one reason why contemporary mythological fiction has gained popularity. It connects

cultural memory with present-day debates. The past becomes a literary space through which the present can be questioned.

Neelakantan's fiction consequently demonstrates that mythology is not a dead cultural form. It remains capable of generating new meanings when approached from different perspectives.

**Conclusion :** Anand Neelakantan's fiction demonstrates the continuing relevance of myth in contemporary Indian English literature. His major achievement lies in transforming familiar epic narratives into spaces of questioning and debate. Through *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*, and *Ajaya: Rise of Kali*, he gives narrative importance to characters traditionally associated with defeat, opposition, or moral ambiguity.

His treatment of Ravana, Bhadra, Duryodhana, Karna, and other characters challenges the assumption that mythological narratives possess only one fixed meaning. By changing the narrative perspective, he exposes the relationship between storytelling and power. The victorious are not automatically presented as morally perfect, and the defeated are not automatically reduced to villains.

The subversion in Neelakantan's fiction therefore operates at several levels. It is narrative because it changes the point of view; moral because it questions absolute categories of good and evil; social because it addresses caste and marginalisation; gendered because it raises questions about patriarchy and female agency; and political because it examines authority, legitimacy, and power.

At the same time, his novels do not simply replace traditional myths with new certainties. Their greater value lies in creating ambiguity and encouraging readers to think critically. Myth becomes a living text capable of accommodating multiple voices and interpretations.

Neelakantan's fiction ultimately suggests that every cultural narrative can be revisited from another position. The significance of myth lies not only in what it tells us about the past but also in what it allows us to question in the present. By bringing the voices of the vanquished and marginalised into the centre of the narrative, Anand Neelakantan contributes to a significant trend in contemporary Indian fiction in English: the transformation of inherited myths into counter-narratives that challenge established ideas of morality, identity, social hierarchy, and power.

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