

# GALAXY

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## Book Review

**Title:** *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished, The Story of Ravana and His People*

**Author:** Anand Neelakantan

**Publisher:** Platinum Press, Mumbai

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The scrolls of history favours the victorious as well as the martyrs; and the historian's flair for language and a look out for popular opinion tips the balance that defines a hero and a villain so much so that one who is celebrated as a noble warrior on one side of the globe could be a treacherous barbarian to the other side.

Deconstructing the scriptures and a tendency to fictionalize mythology with the evident purpose of humanizing the Gods and unearth the hidden voices lying underneath the panegyrics of heroism has a tradition of decades. While in the west writers like Jose Saramago (*The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*) and Nikos Kazantzakis (*The Last Temptation*) struggled to bring down Jesus to a human level, vernacular writers in India stand out with the unknown side of the great epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*; Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjaya* and Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* are to name a few.

The debut novel of Anand Neelakantan, the Kerala born writer cum engineer, faces a much more challenging task by switching sides and producing a counter epic to *Ramayana*. Set in the distant past, the basic premise of the novel is to question the position of Asura as 'the Other', in other words to decode the equation of fairness with greatness, by projecting an alternate history where Gods play human without the attributes of divinity. Laid out in sixty five chapters, the narrative proceeds through the voices of its double protagonists, and begins at 'The End' and closes with the final chapter 'The Beginning'. An elaborate glossary is added towards the end explaining the Indian terms which are incorporated in the narration.

As it is shown in the cover blurb of the book, this is the story of Ravana, the unscrupulous demon king in *Ramayana* who abducted the wife of Rama, the allegedly divine incarnation of Vishnu.

'For thousands of years, I have been vilified and my death is celebrated year after year in every corner of India. Why? Was it because I challenged the Gods for the sake of my daughter? Was it because I freed a race from the yoke of caste-based Deva rule? You have heard the victor's tale, the *Ramayana*. Now hear the Ravanayana, for I am Ravana, the Asura, and my story is the tale of the vanquished.' (cover page)

Beginning from the half dead state of the fallen Asura emperor in the battlefield, readers are led through a series of reminiscences which paints out the rags to riches story of a casteless boy from a shaking, shrunken hut on the hill top to the glistening palace in Trikota.

Left in the ditch by his father the Maharishi and half brother Kubera, Ravana and his brothers are trained and educated by Mahabali, the Asura King who is ousted out of power due to an uncommon favour to a Deva Brahmin. In this untouchable boy lies the fate of a banished society and culture as is evident from the words of Mahabali: "I do not know, whether you are the promise of our miserable people or their curse. You could be both and many things beyond" (29). With a 'revolution of indigestion' he manages to usurp Kubera's throne and from there sprouts the glorious Asura empire which goes beyond the peninsula. Now he is onto his last *karma* – duty – and lying on the wet earth which drank the blood of both his kinsmen and his enemies and being eaten alive by the jackals, he narrates his life story which in turn becomes the story of his vanquished race.

Equipped with two narrative voices Anand has strived hard to offer an objective picture of Asura and Deva culture; whereas the first person narrative of Ravana's is the ruler's version, Bhadra the second protagonist is the representative of *aam aadmi* – common man – who are trampled on and crushed to mud in the race for power.

The popular image of Ravana which the cover page visualizes with protruding front teeth, thick curled up villainous moustache and engulfing round eyes is in sharp contrast with the doting father, the devoted husband, painter and expert musician in the story. Unlike Rama who is the divine perfect with his life drawn around scriptures which consequently led him to sacrifice everything for his *dharma*, Ravana is a man to the core who despite Mahabali's warnings to shun the nine base emotions of anger, pride, jealousy, happiness, sadness, fear, selfishness, passion and ambition, keeps them intact and is therefore known as Dasamukha or ten faced.

Ravana sees himself as the epitome of a complete human being; without any pretense to holiness or restricted by social and religious norms. He is as good or as bad as any human being, and as nature intended man to be. Society is unable to curb his other nine faces, as it does in the figure of Rama. So Rama may be seen as God, but Ravana is the more complete man. Our epics have used the ten heads of Ravana to symbolize a man without control over his passions – eager to embrace and taste life – all of it. (5)

As the fate of a movie depends on the verdict of the spectators, it is not the king's lonely contemplation of glorious reign, but his subjects' validation that affirms the merit of his throne. Here the dark, foul-smelling Bhadra armed with his veto power, shatters the illusion of Ravana's golden era where the development fails to move beyond the city walls.

And it was said that under Ravana's reign, the Asura kingdom prospered at a great rate. It was true. The elite prospered, so the country prospered. Did it really matter if the majority struggled or farmers committed suicide to escape the usurers? We were the invisible people and did not count. (303)

Though been a part of Ravana's crucial victories, and the brain behind his initial successes, he is dropped as a curry leaf with his services taken for granted; "Ravana's revolution had given us nothing. We were perhaps slightly better off. . . But we had been put in our place and quickly learnt how to behave" (301).

Rama-Ravana war as portrayed in the novel is not simply a battle on personal grudges, on the other hand the conflict is between that of two races and of two different cultures or mindsets; the Deva system of caste based society where anyone who does a useful job are looked down as untouchables, where women are put into auction as a cattle in the

market under the pretty name of *swayamvara*, is in direct opposition to a society run by an untouchable king where anyone of ambition can reach to the heights he desires and where girls are raised almost in the same manner as boys and provided with uncontrollable freedom. Raging against the rigid Brahminical structure which transforms Bhadra's native village to God's Own Country which leaves no space for humans, Anand Neelakantan has opened a daring path in Indian English fiction. Like Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* who prefers to reign over hell than to serve in heaven, Anand's Ravana is not ashamed of his fall nor is he repentant. "Ravana was a man who lived life on his own terms, doing what he thought was right and caring nothing for what was written by holy men; a man who lived life fully and died a warrior's death. . . and it is only the small detail of who won, that decided the hero and the villain, in their epic life stories" (494).