

Whispers Seeking Wholeness: The Emergence of Self through Identity and Redemption in Anand Neelakantan's Select Novels

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Abstract

Mythology and history have long been the integral part of human civilization and therefore mythological and historical narratives and their character are inseparable from literary tradition of all period. Fragmented modern realities by transforming individual experience into collective significance. Rather than remaining fixed or sacredly immutable mythological and historical narratives are continuously reshaped by the ideological, ethical, and emotional concerns of each age. In Indian English Literature, authors and writers repeatedly turned to indigenous mythological traditions drawn from epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Neelakantan's mythological and historical retellings most notably *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, *Vanara: The Legend of Baali*, *Sugreeva and Tara*, *Valmiki's Women*, and the *Baahubali* prequel novels dismantle the traditional hero villain dichotomy. Their inner voices about morality and authority reveal wholeness through power, ethical and moral ambiguity following in emergence of self through identity and redemption. Ravan refuses to suppress the emotions as they are the ones that challenged the Devas, in doing so Ravan embraces the contradiction as essential to wholeness. Baali that does not believe in any form of natural and inherent superiority that had been imposed on him by the dominant culture. Sivagami's journey represents the gradual emergence of the self from fractured memory, structural violence, and gendered marginalisation, and that her transformation into the Queen is a complex process of self-reconstruction. Neelakantan's novels do not present a stable moral lesson because they require readers to analyse and assess their content which they must also interpret. Neelakantan's fiction proposes that identity is not a stable essence but a continuous process of becoming, and redemption is the courage to confront one's fractured self and transform that recognition into ethical consciousness.

Keywords: Mythology, Identity, Redemption, Narrative, Autonomus



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Mythology and history have long been the integral part of human civilization and therefore mythological and historical narratives and their character are inseparable from literary tradition of all period. Traditionally they were treated as sacred narratives that explained the origins of the world, social order, and moral values. Once they have entered literary domain, they have evolved as a *living discourse*, a continuous conversation between the past and the present especially modern and contemporary writings instead of remaining static. The complexities of human nature are articulated through ethical frameworks, archetypal structures and symbolic depth that were richly provided by the mythological and historical narratives. These narratives have enabled authors to negotiate chaos, moral ambiguity, and existential crisis to impose order on fragmented modern realities by transforming individual experience into collective significance. Rather than remaining fixed or sacredly immutable mythological and historical narratives are continuously reshaped by the ideological, ethical, and emotional concerns of each age. They are adapted by writers to reinterpret inherited narratives in ways that speak to contemporary experiences of identity, power, conflict, and transformation according to the shifting social realities.

In Indian English Literature, authors and writers repeatedly turned to indigenous mythological traditions drawn from epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to reclaim cultural memory and assert narrative autonomy against colonial and dominant historiographies. Early Indian English novelists used mythology *subtly rather than overtly* within realist fiction to connect India's cultural past with its modern present that focused on common people rather than gods or epic heroes, their journeys of self-discovery, trials followed

by moral awakening, exile and return, and fall-and-redemption arcs resemble archetypal mythological motifs. Contemporary Indian English literature has further expanded the scope of mythological and historical engagement by transforming them into mythological fictions and fictional histories as a site of ethical inquiry and psychological exploration. The retellings of authors like Amish Tripathi, Amithov Gosh, Devdatt pattnayak, Kavita Kane etc. rather than reinforcing fixed moral binaries interrogate concepts of ethics, power, loyalty, and justice. It is within this literary and cultural framework, the novelist Anand Neelakantan instead of telling us about the glorious victories of gods and kings, foreground the perspectives of the marginalised, the defeated, and the morally ambivalent.

Neelakantan's mythological and historical retellings most notably *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, *Vanara: The Legend of Baali*, *Sugreeva and Tara*, *Valmiki's Women*, and the *Baahubali* prequel novels dismantle the traditional hero villain dichotomy and humanise mythic figures by exposing their emotional vulnerabilities, ethical conflicts, and psychological traumas. The narratives like Ravana, Bali (Vaali) and Sivagami reflect the fragmented selves strive for recognition and moral reconciliation within oppressive and exclusionary power structures. Their inner voices about morality and authority reveal wholeness through power, ethical and moral ambiguity following in emergence of self through identity and redemption. Conventionally, Ravan and asura have been portrayed as demons with arrogance and violence, but the author in this case has humanized Ravana as a highly conflicted personality due to humiliation, discrimination,

and the struggle for dignity throughout his life. Likewise, the Baali and Sugreeva conflicts have been shown as highly human tragedy due to power politics, insecurity, and irrevocable loss. In the *Baahubali* prequel novels, the author has portrayed Sivagami's identity as forged in conditions of loss, displacement, and political instability. His characters transform into a space for exploring identity formation, ethical failure, and the painful search for redemption.

Author Neelakantan allows Ravana the traditional villain in the *Asura* to narrate his own story. He repositioned the margin as a legitimate site of meaning and disrupted the authority of the epic centre. His repeated reflection on Deva aggression through Ravana narrative shows a pattern of epistemic violence. The act of violence of Devas on the Asura clan, not only destroyed the cities, it erased the Asura's knowledge systems and their cultural system was delegitimated. In the novel *Asura* the Dhasamukha Ravana is shown with ten varied emotions like anger, pride, fear, jealousy, love, ambition, sorrow, joy, courage, and intellect. Ravan himself has declared that he wants all these emotions to live his life when he was under Mahabali. He refuses to suppress the emotions as they are the ones that challenged the Deva. In doing so Ravan embraces the contradiction as essential to wholeness. Another mythological fiction *Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara* reimagines the Kishkindha narrative of the *Ramayana* through a proto-historical and subaltern lens, dismantling the mythic binaries of hero and villain. The narratives Baali, Sugreeva and Tara constructs identity as a site of resistance against caste hierarchy, cultural erasure, and political manipulation and redemption is considered as an ethical reconciliation with the self, the community, and history. Baali and Sugreeva are

treated as untouchables forced to carry night soil and remain invisible, establish the trauma of social exclusion that shapes their later lives.

Baali challenges the status quo on multiple fronts through three different levels that reveal his resistance to the concept of purity on the basis of caste, his rebellion against religious authority, and his assertion of his inherent and indigenous dignity. Through his ongoing power struggles, he faces a number of obstacles that prevent him from discovering his true self. In a strange turn of fate, he also emerges as the king he once battled against. The concept of belonging to the Vanara requires Baali to defend it and to acquire and assert total control over other beings. This desire to uplift the collective dignity of his people also creates a moral conflict that ultimately serves as Baali's fatal flaw. Baali's character journey transforms from a heroic fall to a struggle against his inner self, a fall that results from his innermost traumas. His strong disagreement serves to heighten his emotional instability and his association to the concept of Vanara pride but also serves to redeem him.

The moment of instant knowledge that Baali becomes aware of the possibility of producing fire not only through physical labour but also not through sacred mantras is of symbolically rich meaning. This is because this moment represents an epistemic rebellion against the Brahmin-led monopoly over knowledge and understanding. The sacred that had been used to justify social hierarchy and superiority becomes accessible not only through physical labor but also becomes accessible to anyone who is willing to persevere and exert physical labor. This moment represents the creation of a new consciousness in Baali that does not believe in any form of natural and inherent superiority that had been imposed on him by the dominant

culture. This moment of knowledge is not only about technological advancement but also represents the ontological dimension of knowledge and understanding. Baali becomes empowered with the ability to create her own self-image that does not have to exist within the definitions and constraints of the dominant culture.

Baahubali prequel trilogy historical-mythical reconstructions consistently dismantle the stability of epic morality and foreground voices that emerge from the margins of power. The movement towards redemption is experiential, ethical, and deeply psychological. Sivagami's journey represents the gradual emergence of the self from fractured memory, structural violence, and gendered marginalisation, and that her transformation into the Queen is a complex process of self-reconstruction. The narrative begins with loss that Sivagami's childhood is marked by the execution of her father, Devaraya, who is branded a traitor by the state. This moment produces a rupture in both personal and historical memory. The child does not merely lose a parent; she inherits a stigma. Her identity is immediately politicised, for she becomes the daughter of a condemned man in a kingdom where loyalty to the throne defines moral legitimacy. Her displacement to the orphanage, removed from aristocratic privilege and forced into a marginal institutional space, Sivagami encounters caste hierarchies, gender discrimination, and the politics of survival. The orphanage becomes a microcosm of the kingdom, where power is reproduced in smaller forms. It is in this space that she learns to read structures of domination and to negotiate them strategically. Sivagami is neither the powerless orphan nor the unquestioning servant of the state; she becomes a liminal figure who moves

between margins and centre, subalternity and sovereignty. The act of reading her father's manuscript is one of the most symbolically charged moments in the trilogy. Literacy here functions as a tool of self-recovery. The manuscript represents an alternative archive, a counter-history that challenges the ideological apparatus of Mahishmathi. In postcolonial terms, this is the recovery of the suppressed narrative. By reading and interpreting the text, Sivagami reconstructs her lineage and reclaims her moral inheritance. Identity is therefore textual as well as experiential; it is produced through the act of interpretation.

The political landscape has become more and more complex with the flow of the plot. The metaphor of chess board (the political landscape) is crucial in understanding the transformation of Sivagami. She has become an active agent to reactive subject. The state once she opposed has become the structure she has to sustain. Now her shift is no longer the restoration of her father's identity, it is to create a just political order within an inherently unjust system. When Sivagami has become an active agent, she did not just simply acquire power but she has reshaped it. This shows that her emergence of self is not just about moral perfection but a continuous negotiation between authority and empathy.

Likewise, Baali develops his existence through resistance to oppression while the historical memory of his people restricts his existence. His rage is not individual but historical, rooted in the displacement of the Vanara people from their land, their reduction to servitude, and the distortion of their cultural identity through language and ritual. His rejection of the label "Vanara" and his insistence on the term Vana Nara represent a struggle over naming, which in postcolonial

discourse is always a struggle over power. The subaltern struggle to assert their existence becomes tragic through Baali's life journey. The king's reasons for protecting his people through his authorization process of ruling will develop into his future need. His identity, initially constructed in opposition to hierarchy, becomes entangled with the structures of power he once resisted. People should understand the transformation as an ethical collapse because they perceive it as an ethical collapse. His community needs him to protect their existence through his political system which demands him to exhibit extreme masculinity while he maintains complete emotional control. The novel shows his hidden tenderness which he hides through his tough exterior when he interacts with Sugreeva. The tyrant image becomes more complex through Baali's love for his brother and his brother's memories and his quest to build a safe environment for the Vanaras. His emotional truth, which he maintains through his connection to this truth, protects his identity from degradation into total power control.

The depiction of Ravana's Lanka presents a cultural environment that fosters intellectual growth together with technological progress and accessible social advancement. The people of Lanka implement a system that rewards achievement instead of noble birth which helps them develop their scientific knowledge through research instead of following traditional ceremonial practices. Ravana's ascent from an outcast who faced discrimination to his position as a powerful leader demonstrates how people achieve empowerment through fighting back against oppression while using their intelligence. Neelakantan maintains his position by showing Asura power without delivering any romanticized version. Ravana's power begins to

merge with his personal identity because he develops an obsession with his authority and his constant need for approval from others. His refusal to heed dissenting voices especially those of Mandodari and Vibhishana signals the erosion of ethical leadership. People who use power for defence purposes end up developing an obsession with power which results in their need for control and their desire to show superiority over others.

In *Asura*, however, it becomes a moment of existential clarity. He recognises the tragic irony of Rama calling him a “great king” while his kingdom lies in ruins. This irony produces not resentment but self-awareness. He realises that his utopian vision—though politically radical and socially progressive—was undermined by his own ego and his inability to control the machinery of power. A crucial aspect of Ravana's transformation is that he does not blame the Devas, fate, or destiny for his fall. Earlier in his life, he interprets history through the lens of Asura victimhood and Deva oppression. But at the end, his reflections shift from political accusation to moral introspection. This movement from ideological certainty to ethical questioning marks a profound shift. Redemption here lies in accepting responsibility without the consolation of divine forgiveness. Unlike the epic Ravana, who dies as a cosmic villain, Neelakantan's Ravana dies with the ethical recognition that transforms him from a mythic symbol into a morally conscious human being.

Neelakantan's novels do not present a stable moral lesson because they require readers to analyse and assess their content which they must also interpret. The reader establishes meaning through their personal cultural background and their belief system and their individual life experiences. The character of

Rama as a hero and the character of Ravana as a villain undergo transformation in *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*. The story reveals Ravana's human qualities through his experience of poverty and shame and his ambition and dedication to his family. Readers begin to sympathise with him and question the rigid division between good and evil. The characters of Sugreeva and Tara in *Vanara: The Legend of Baali* lose their definite moral path. The emotional depth of Baali and Sugreeva makes readers choose between supporting one character or the other. Tara emerges as an intelligent and politically aware woman, encouraging gender-sensitive readings. The traditional view of Baali's killing as a just act creates ethical discomfort, which leads readers to challenge divine power. The *Baahubali* trilogy uses power themes and political themes and identity themes to create its reader response. The emotional journey of Sivagami transforms from an orphan to a queen, which creates a powerful emotional response because it depicts modern struggles for justice and self-identity. Different readers identify with different characters, allowing multiple interpretations.

Anand Neelakantan's retellings transform myth and history from fixed moral narratives into dynamic spaces of ethical inquiry, where identity emerges through conflict, memory, and self-recognition rather than through divine validation. By foregrounding Ravana, Baali, and Sivagami as complex and historically conditioned figures, the novels dismantle the epic binary of hero and villain and relocate meaning within the lived experiences of the marginalised. Their journeys reveal that wholeness is not achieved through moral perfection but through the acceptance of contradiction, the negotiation of power, and the capacity for ethical introspection. Ravana's final

self-realisation, Baali's tragic entanglement with the very structures he resists, and Sivagami's movement from dispossession to political agency collectively demonstrate that redemption in Neelakantan's narrative universe is experiential and self-reflexive. It is grounded in responsibility, memory, and the painful recognition of one's own complicity in structures of domination.

These texts also function as counter-archives that recover suppressed histories and challenge epistemic hierarchies, thereby aligning personal identity with collective cultural reclamation. The emergence of the self is thus inseparable from questions of knowledge, naming, gender, caste, and political power. At the same time, the novels refuse to impose a single moral closure; instead, they invite readers to participate in the process of meaning-making. Each reader's ethical and emotional response reshapes the narrative, making interpretation itself an act of engagement with power and justice. Ultimately, Neelakantan's fiction proposes that identity is not a stable essence but a continuous process of becoming, and redemption is the courage to confront one's fractured self and transform that recognition into ethical consciousness.

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