Echoes from Empires to Wilderness: Spatial Dynamics and Power Ethics in Anand Neelakantan's Select Novels

A. Anthathi
Ph. D. Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages
Mother Teresa Women's University, Kodaikanal, India

Dr. A. Rajalakshmi
Assistant Professor of English and Foreign Languages
Mother Teresa Women's University, Kodaikanal, India

Abstract
Anand Neelakantan's mythological retellings challenge dominant narratives by recasting the 'vanquished' as protagonists. He explores the socio-political, emotional, and ecological intricacies embedded in classical Indian myths. By juxtaposing empires and wilderness, the writer emphasizes the role of spatiality in shaping socio-political identities. Empires symbolize structured oppression, while wilderness embodies resistance, trauma, and transformation. In Asura, Ravana's Lanka, despite being depicted as an advanced civilization, is marked by oppressive structures. In Valmiki's Women, Tara, often relegated to the side-lines in classical retellings, emerges as a powerful voice challenging patriarchal norms. Through the deconstruction of hegemonic structures and moral binaries, his works pave the way for an ethical mythology that is both inclusive and transformative. This approach plays a vital role in highlighting the potential of Indian English literature to redefine mythology by fostering interdisciplinary dialogues between literature, ecology, and ethics. Breaking down complex ideas into more relatable examples, his work enhances readers' perspectives of understanding in relevance to contemporary issues. His narratives not only retell ancient myths but also provide a wide-ranging tool through which readers are able to critically examine power subtleties, historical narratives, and their societal implications. He offers a vision of mythology as a living, evolving entity capable of transcending static retellings, addressing the pressing concerns of modern life.
Keywords: Deconstruction, Trauma, Juxtaposing, Ecological, Societal Implications

In contemporary Indian literature mythological retelling and fictional histories occupy a unique status. They bridge between past and present, challenging the dominant narratives. Indian English writers like Amish Tripathi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Devdutt Pattanaik, Kavitha Kane and some others blend mythology, philosophy, and history to humanize Gods and focus on giving a voice to characters that are traditionally marginalized in Indian epics. Fictional histories of authors like Salman Rushdie, Amitov Gosh, Sashi Tharoor, Indu Sundaresan focus on various Indian culture, power struggles and political systems reflected during Mughal period, Colonial Period and other historical eras. Anand Neelakantan among Indian authors of mythological retellings and fictional histories emphasizes the complexity, humanity, and marginalized perspectives of the so-called 'villains' and 'lesser' characters in Indian epics. Revisiting mythologies and histories, and recasting losers, Villains or the marginalized as protagonists, the writers challenge the dichotomy of good vs evil and also questions the morality of the victorious. Also, by placing empire and wilderness side by side, the socio political, economic and ecological identities are explored in terms of the role played by spatial dynamics.

Empires particularly Lanka (Asura), Kishkindha (Vanara), and Mahishmathi (Bahubali series) are the representations of hierarchical control, moral rigidity, and the fragility of power structures. These empires represent both the allure and burdens. They exemplify how the quest for identity was oppressed resulting in injustice, inequality and ethical dilemmas under the imperialists. Ravana raised from a humble being to the ruler of Lanka. He developed Lanka into a prosperous, technically advanced civilization and elevated it into a city with unimaginable grandeur. Despite presenting Ravana as an able king, the author focuses on the cost of his ambition. The hierarchical control shown in Lanka is similar to that of imperialist ideologies that often reflects Ravana's challenges as a leader. His rule chose to prioritise expansion, power and personal ambition over the wellbeing of his people. This sometimes led to inequality and insufficiency in certain asura tribes who were left out for the benefits of Lanka. It is framed that Ravana's decision to abduct Sita was ego driven assertion of authority over Rama. However, there are instances that overshadow the possibility that Ravana's actions may have stemmed from deeper socio-political motivations or personal insecurities. He is casted as an asura who struggled and critiqued imperialism. It shows that Lanka is a mere metaphor of an oppressive empire. Thus, as according to the novel the fall of Lanka was inevitable as the consequence of Ravana's rigid morality and oppression showcasing him as a complex leader torn between personal desires and responsibilities as a leader.

Kishkindha in Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva, and Tara is a kingdom that flourished under the strength of Baali. But the same kingdom was dismantled as a result of betrayal, jealousy, unchecked ambitions and tyranny largely from Sugreeva, brother of Baali. Same as that of Lanka, Kishkindha's fall is the result of the Baali's authoritarian tendencies, while Sugreeva and Rama are presented as righteous agents of change. Baali's decision to exile Sugreeva is the turning point in the novel. This is where the actual collapse of Kishkindha starts. Baali sends Sugreeva in exile; however, this act is presented as the action triggered by paranoia of betrayal. The character Sugreeva is not entirely innocent whether it is born out of fear of opportunism. During the fight between Dundubhi, Sugreeva seals the cave prematurely without taking Baali's strength in account. But Baaliemerges victorious, his rage at Sugreeva is not unfounded. So, exiling his brother was the act of protecting himself from a brother who has already shown willingness to undermine him. Tara, wife of Baali takes the place as the critic of her husband. She repeatedly urges Baali to reconcile with Sugreeva. She also insisted him to abandon his pursuit of vengeance. But he failed to listen to her suggestions for the deep betrayal he felt by Sugreeva. Thus, by vilifying Baali's leadership the author reduces a complex narrative into a simple critique of hierarchical power. Also, the author , overlooking the flaws of those who conspired against him, presents him as a tyrant whose downfall is inevitable.

Mahishmathi, yet another epitome of power and grandeur in Anand Neelakantan's Bahubali Series is presented as the symbol of imperialism. This empire is depicted as a sprawling empire with the elite privileged with power and marginalized suffering from corruption. Through the lens of characters like Sivagami and Bhallaladeva this imperial land is painted grand yet deeply flawed, representing a vivid representation of oppressive hierarchies and power dynamics. Apart from the complexities of governance with the nuances of leadership or the empire's achievements, the narrative sheds light on the human cost of imperial ambition. The city's grand monument and taxation policies imposed on the improvisation of the city is result of the back-bending labours of the slaves and working classes, which highlights inequality and injustice that was prevailing in it. The construction of Mahishmathi's monumental dam represents the empire's technological and administrative strength, on the other hand it was a devastating toll on the labours of the empire. It shows the influence of the power of the elite to harness the natural resources of the city. The empires vision is being hold by the laborers and slaves, toiling inhuman conditions and high taxation policies on them.

Sivagami, an orphaned girl rises to power during her journey to unfold the mystery in her father's murder. The foundation to her rise through the political ranks were driven by revenge and justice for her father's murder. On her journey one can see evidently that her father's murder reveals a corrupt nexus between the nobility and the traders, where greed and self-interest override any commitment to justice. Her skills on manipulating alliances and eliminating rivals were the necessary responses to the systemic oppression. These

alliances allow her to gain power and influence, but her rise to power is marked by decisions that blur the lines between justice, vengeance, and pragmatism. On analysing the text of the writer Ballaladeva's reign wasthe neglect of expected successful management resulting in unchecked ambition, cruelty, and exploitation, culminating in the empire's eventual collapse. He made use of slave labor and military oppression to maintain control which reflects the extremes of authoritarian rule.

When analyzing the characters like Ravana, Tara, and Sivagami their silence within the authority is evident or the reason for rising against the authority. Ravana's ambition to build the city of Lanka for the asuras reflects his vision for a society that is rooted in equality in justice and cultural practices. However, the voice given to Ravana disrupts the ideology of the dominant powers that Rama upheld. Ravana was not entirely romanticised by the author. He has painted him as a flawed figure. The situations where the contradiction is also exposed. Badra, an asura but from a different group, remains a counterpart to Ravana, always highlighting the exploitation and marginalization experienced by ordinary citizens under Ravana's rule. The subaltern voice of Ravana as presented, according to the novel rises to many perspectives to other subaltern characters in literature.

Tara's portrayal in Vanara often defines women's roles in patriarchal narratives overshadowed by the masculine conflicts. Her narrative is interwoven within Baali's betrayal and Sugreeva's ambitions, underscores the complexities of gendered oppression and emotional resilience.Tara is claimed as both a victim of patriarchal structures and an agent of change. Her wisdom and emotional intelligence offering an alternative model of leadership rooted in empathy and foresight stand in stark contrast to Baali's impulsive actions. She repeatedly warns Baali about his unchecked obsession for power after Sugreeva's exile. She also highlighted his pursuit of vengeance and its consequences. Tara's resilience in the face of these limitations underscores the emotional toll of patriarchy on women, offering a feminist critique of the power dynamics that define Kishkindha's collapse.

Mahishmathi even though shown as a utopian empire of grandeur, the voices of labourers and slaves have been erased within the glorified narrative of the empire. So here the author shows that the monumental structures of Mahismathi are the symbols of cost borne by the oppressed classes who live and die in servitude. This challenge's the glorification of Mahishmathi and also this aspect of the narrative parallels the subaltern's contributions that are often overshadowed from historical and cultural discourses.Here the voices of the labourers are made to talk louder and audible,by the author leading to question the political system. Sivagami's journey reflects the notion that marginalized voices can achieve true liberation within dominant frameworks. On analysing the system of hierarchy and her journey it is quite evident that those systems of power are designed to absorb and neutralize dissent, allowing marginalized individuals to rise only if they align with dominant ideologies.

Neelakantan's works have also exposed erasure of certain characters which took literature further to debate on the existing dichotomies of hero versus villain and feminine versus masculine authority. Particularly giving voices to the experiences, struggles, and viewpoints of marginalized individuals or groups who or which were ignored, misrepresented, or completely left out of historical records, literature, or cultural narratives. Reimaging mythology and producing a fiction with a historical perception does more thanold stories. This way of writing challenges the binary perceptions of heroes and villains, shining a light on the complexities of power, oppression, and human resilience. The author is exploring the marginalised characters that serve as powerful reminders that every narrative has multiple layers waiting to be unravelled irrespective of hero or villain or feminine or masculine.

Nature like forest, river, cities and mountains in his narratives also play a vital role. These spaces in Neelakantan's stories resist human domination and stand as metaphors for systems out of balance, urging readers to reflect on their own ecological impact. Forest in Vanara reflects the embodiment of natural spaces for political and personal gain. Even though Ravana's ambitions to build Lanka with immense architectural and technological advancements are portrayed with sympathy, the author indirectly criticises Ravana's

disregard for the ecological balance that sustains human life. By imbuing nature with agency and critiquing systems of power, he challenges readers to move beyond the idealized portrayals of mythological heroes and empires. Surpanaka and Tadaka in Valmiki's women represent forest as a place of freedom and happiness and they live in peace with nature before Rama's arrival.

The narratives of Neelakantan struggle with power dynamics. In exploration of character's identity within the structure illustrates the fragility and duality of power. They also explore the moral dilemmas faced by those in power, presenting a more humanized perspective of leaders traditionally cast as villains or tyrants. Sivagami in the Bahubali series exemplifies the limitations of working within the existing systems, raising important questions about the possibility of meaningful change in deeply entrenched power structures. Tara also emerges as a powerful voice of resilience in a patriarchal system. By exposing these silenced voices, the author questions contemporary society. He also invites readers to see new perspectives in political and social levels of understanding that have shaped cultural and historical understanding.

Mythological fictions and fictional histories are a call for reflection and action to re-evaluate values and practices that were once regarded inevitable in actual histories and mythologies. Neelakantan's nuanced exploration of power dynamics in mythological retelling and fictional histories pushes readers to question simplistic ideals of justice, leadership, and legacy. While reading Neelakantan's mythologies, readers are reminded that the lessons of mythology are not confined to the past but remain deeply relevant to the present. Ultimately mythology and histories are not about answers, they are about questioning the older systems that were once contemporary. The answers they give for all contemporary situations are comparatively the balancing but including certain nuance in debate may add clearer than the before.

Blending of the ancient wisdom with the modern insights offers a mythological view that is ever evolving like that of humanity itself. Mythological retelling and historical fictions have transcended the literary confines. This offers a profound view on societal and cultural, ecological, and political realities. His novels allow the readers interest to listen, learn, and act not as passive inheritors of tradition but as active participants in creating a more equitable and sustainable world. In Neelakantan's retellings, nuanced exploration of silenced perspectives, proves that mythology is not a relic of the past but a dynamic force capable of shaping the present and guiding the future.

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