
Representing Raavan: A comparative disquisition on the characterization of Raavan based on Asura by Anand Neelakantan and Raavan by Amish Tripathy

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Abstract:

Epics and mythological stories are well known for their diversity in characterization and narratives. This diversity leads to further understanding of the characters from multiple perspectives, which would give readers an enhanced reading experience by reinterpreting the same plot from different perspectives. Ramayana, the well-known Indian epic, had many versions written by great scholars of different languages. Most versions of Ramayana portrayed Ram, the protagonist, the prince of Ayodhya, as an embodiment of good virtue and sacredness. Raavan, the antagonist, is often portrayed as the embodiment of evil virtues and tragic flaws. Literary reimagination often deconstructs the layers of characterization employed by the author and offers a chance to reinterpret the story from an alternate view. The novels Raavan: The Enemy of Aryavarta by Amish Tripathy and Asura : Tale of the Vanquished: The Story of Ravana and His People by Anand Neelakantan do the same by offering the plot of the well-known Indian epic Ramayana, from the perspective of Raavan, the antagonist. The aim of the study is to analyze how these novels contribute to the enhanced literary reimagination of the character Raavan and analyze the factors involved in the narration of this alternative perspective.

Keywords: Mythology, Epics, Deconstruction, Reimagination, Raavan.

Introduction

Literary Reimaginings offer an entirely unique perspective to well-known epics and add interesting twists through their interpretations. The interpretation provides an alternative aspect far from the often-told conventional version of any story. The early literary reimaginings, such as *Paradise Lost* by Milton, created a whole new literary experience for the readers to learn about the other side of the story from the perspective of a particular character. The versions become more interesting when they are recreated using the perspective of the antagonist, who is portrayed with tragic flaws. In Indian mythological

works and Indian epics, the stories have diversified characters with subplots. The characters are categorized based on virtues and their karma. In the epic Ramayana, the protagonist Rama, revered and worshipped all over India, is portrayed as a man of valor and virtues. The antagonist, Raavan, is often portrayed as a person who possesses evil characteristics and eventually meets his tragic fate. Almost all the different versions of Ramayana across the country offer the same stand about Raavan. A few works, such as *Raavana Kaaviyam*, *Asura*, *Raavan*, etc., offer an alternative perspective. Though the story remains the same, where Raavan is ultimately killed at the end, these stories tend to provide reasons for the flawed characterization of Raavan and the cause of war from Raavan's perspective. These plots narrate the stories through the lens of the antagonist, where the plot has validations and reasons to strengthen the antagonistic perspective towards the incidents of the plot. This style is welcomed by the readers, who get to experience both sides of the story. The novels *Raavan: The Enemy of Aryavarta* by Amish Tripathy and *Asura : Tale of the Vanquished: The Story of Ravana and His People* by Anand Neelakantan do the same by offering the plot of the well-known Indian epic Ramayana, from the perspective of Raavan, the antagonist. Various factors and meanings of concepts of evil, good, morals, and virtues are discussed in these novels. Since the novels narrate the story of the antagonist, they have a different subplot to substantiate the reasons for Raavan and additional characters explaining the same. Both novels were national bestsellers, and various studies, literary analyses, and discussions carried out using these novels were carried out by the readers appreciating the literary reimagination and the nuanced writing styles of both authors.

Discussion

Jacques Derrida has discussed the theory of deconstruction as

“That is what deconstruction is made of: not the mixture but the tension between memory, fidelity, the preservation of something that has been given to us, and, at the same time, heterogeneity, something absolutely new, and a break” (Derrida 6).

Deconstruction refers to a critique approach that seeks to identify the complexity and underlying narratives of texts. It emerged during the 1960s within the context of post-structuralism and has greatly affected several domains like literature, philosophy, linguistics, and cultural studies. The fluidity of meaning and interpretation is the main focus of deconstruction as it suggests against the conventional methods of analyzing texts. Deconstruction is founded upon the argument that a large portion of Western thought is organized in binary oppositions (pairs of opposing concepts, i.e. good-evil, light-dark, male-female, presence/absence). Such binaries are often hierarchical, with preferred terms placed above their counterparts. This central idea of deconstruction, known as decentering, seeks to show that one of the privileged terms relies on its opposite for its meaning, and thus, these binaries must be dismantled. This means that any text can be read in multiple ways, revealing contradictions and ambiguities that challenge its superficial meaning.

For deconstructionists, the act of reading is not about uncovering a single, correct interpretation but about exploring the multiple possibilities of meaning that a text can generate. The theory emphasizes that meaning is not fixed but is always dynamic, shaped by

various contextual factors and the play of language. This theory, when applied to literary characters, allows the readers to identify the layers of their construction, revealing the multifaceted nature of their identity, actions, and sometimes the intentions of the characterization.

In Amish Tripathi's *Raavan* and Anand Neelkantan's *Asura*, Raavan's character emerges as one of the most complex and compelling figures. Far from being the one-dimensional villain of the traditional Ramayana narrative, the reimagined Raavan portrayed by both authors is a textured character, embodying a range of contradictions and nuances that demand a deeper exploration. Amish's depiction of Raavan as a character-driven by a deep sense of injustice and a relentless pursuit of power invites a deconstructive reading that challenges the binary opposition of good versus evil. By emphasizing Raavan's humanity, intelligence, capacity for loyalty, and love, Amish complicates the traditional narrative, revealing the instability of the moral categories that have long defined Raavan's character. The parallels between Raavan and other characters in the series, such as Ram and Sita, a deconstructive reading reveals the ways in which these characters are not as easily categorized as the traditional narrative suggests. This approach highlights the fluidity and complexity of the characters' identities.

The Contrast

Raavan is often depicted as the possessor of evil virtues like ruthlessness, moral corruption, lust for women, etc. This conventional portrayal of Raavan as a symbol of evil serves a clear moral purpose within the epic. The portrayal also includes the projection of Raavan as an embodiment of demonic ten qualities, whereas Anand Neelakantan, in his book, redefines that Raavan was an ordinary man who possessed human qualities, which included the ten qualities that were projected to be demonic.

"Traditional Indian wisdom places importance on the control of one's emotions and projects the intellect alone as being the supreme. The great king Mahabali advises Raavana to shun the other nine basic emotions of anger, pride, jealousy, happiness, sadness, fear, selfishness, passion, and ambition. Intellect is alone to be revered. But, in his response to Mahabali, Raavan justifies and exults in the possession of all these ten facets, as they make him a complete man." (Asura 5)

On the contrary, the reimagined Raavan is portrayed with human qualities, as he aspires to conquer the world and lead a victorious life due to the culmination of accumulated grievances that he faced in his early life. These narratives from the perspective of Raavan show how he was treated as an outcast by both Devas and Asura. The identity crisis depicted in the early life of Raavan in both novels strongly supports the decisions that he takes during his evolution as the ruler of Lanka after defeating Kubera, his stepbrother. Raavan and Asura retell the same incident with mild modifications in the plot. The characters Bhadra and Vibishana are well-characterized in the novels.

The reimagined Raavan in the books offers a departure from the traditional narrative. In *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*, the third book of the series, Amish delves deep into

Raavan's psyche, presenting him as a character-driven by deep-seated pain and a relentless pursuit of power. This version of Raavan is not inherently evil but is shaped by his experiences and the circumstances of his life. Reimagined Raavan by both authors emphasizes his humanity. Raavan is shown to be a product of his environment; his early life was marked by hardship, betrayal, and a sense of being wronged by the world. These experiences fuel his ambition and desire for control, leading him down a path of ruthlessness and tyranny. However, this action is a calculated response to the injustices he perceives around him. In this sense, this version of Raavan embodies the idea that evil is not an inherent trait but a consequence of choices and circumstances. His actions, though often cruel and violent, are motivated by a complex mix of personal pain, a desire for respect, and a quest for meaning in a world that has repeatedly failed him. This nuanced portrayal challenges the simplistic notion of Raavan as a villain, presenting him instead as a tragic figure caught in the web of his own making and identity crises.

Inner Evaluations

Retelling *Ramayana* from Raavan's perspective throws questions on morality and often defines morality from the character's own understanding of the world around him. The characterization of Raavan in these retellings takes control of not justifying his actions but rather concentrates on the part projecting Ram and Raavan as the binaries. It actually talks about the grey zone that is present between the characters. Anand Neelakants's Raavan is the narrative that is aware of the limitations in the characterization and depicts Raavan with humane flaws.

"Raavana 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 fully and died a warrior's death" (Asura 493)

Raavan's actions are shown to stem from a place of deep conviction. He genuinely believes in the righteousness of his cause, whether it is his pursuit of knowledge or his desire to establish a kingdom where he is not bound by the constraints of societal norms. This belief in his own moral code sets Raavan apart from the traditional villain archetype, making him a character who defies easy categorization. This portrayal also raises important questions about the nature of justice. Ravana's sense of injustice is a recurring theme in novels, driving much of his behavior. He sees himself as a victim of circumstances, betrayed by those he trusted, and constantly at odds with a world that refuses to acknowledge his worth. This sense of victimhood creates a potent mix of resentment, leading to his eventual transformation into a tyrant. However, even in his tyranny, Raavan is not without redeeming qualities. His love for his family, particularly his brother Kumbhakarna and his sister Shurpanakha, reveals a softer side to his character. Anand Neelakantan also adds a character, Maricha, a maternal uncle of Raavan, to support this aspect in his plot. He is shown to be capable of deep loyalty and affection, which contrasts sharply with his demeanor. This duality adds to the complexity of Raavan's character, making him a figure who is as much a product of his circumstances.

The Tragic Flaw

Central to Raavan's character arc in the Ram Chandra Series by Amish is his relationship with power. "Refusing to believe the truth doesn't make it any less true" (Amish 112). From a young age, Raavan is driven by a desire to rise above his circumstances and

assert his dominance over those who have wronged him. This quest for power becomes an all-consuming obsession, leading him to make increasingly ruthless decisions. Both Anand Neelakantan and Amish portray Raavan as a character whose intelligence and ambition are matched only by his hubris. His belief in his own superiority, both in terms of intellect and capability, blinds him to the consequences of his actions. This hubris is symbolized by his many heads, each representing a different aspect of his personality, intelligence, ambition, pride, and several aspects. The deconstruction of Raavan's character reveals that his greatest strength is his intellect, which is also his greatest weakness. His inability to see beyond his own perspective leads him to make choices that ultimately lead to his downfall. This tragic flaw aligns Raavan with the archetype of the tragic hero, a figure whose downfall is brought about by a combination of external forces and internal failings. However, unlike the traditional tragic hero, Raavan's downfall is not framed as a simple moral lesson. Instead, it is presented as an inevitable consequence of his choices and the world he inhabits. The novels offer a narrative that suggests power, which, when pursued for its own sake, leads to self-destruction. This idea is further reinforced by the parallels drawn between Raavan and other characters in the novels, such as Ram, Sita, Bhadra, etc, who also face certain setbacks with the complexities of power and morality.

“But karma should not be the center of our lives. If we truly discover our Being, our Swatatva and live in consonance with what we are meant to be, then everything becomes easy. We don't have to try hard to carry out our karma. We will not do anything in the vain hope of something else; we will do it simply because it is in consonance with our Being. With what we were born to Be.” (Amish 169)

In contrast, Amish's portrayal of Raavan places greater emphasis on the role of free will in shaping his destiny. While Raavan is undoubtedly influenced by his circumstances, he is also shown to be an active agent in his own life, making choices that lead him down the path of destruction. This emphasis on agency complicates the traditional narrative, suggesting that Raavan's downfall is not merely a result of fate but is also a consequence of his own decisions. Amish's narrative also challenges the notion of destiny as a fixed, unchangeable force. Raavan's character arc is marked by moments of introspection and doubt, where he is presented with the consequences of his actions and the possibility of redemption. However, his inability to overcome his own flaws, particularly his pride and need for control, ultimately decides his fate. This tension between destiny and free will adds depth to Raavan's character, making his story one of tragic inevitability rather than moral simplicity.

Conclusion

The depiction of the famous Indian mythological character Raavan was handled by delicate layers of characterization by the authors Amish Tripathy and Anand Neelakantan. Though the narrative style varies, the idea of offering an alternative perspective combining the causes and justifications that would've been the probable perspective of Raavan is well depicted by a heightened sense of literary reimagination of the authors. The portrayal of Raavana not as a born embodiment of evil but rather pushed into circumstantial decisions and realities by his choices was an ideal way to make the readers feel relatable about the character and his qualities. The relatability of the contemporary readers was drawn mainly by the questioning of evil and good in our daily life and the interpretation of moral values

depicted in the epics as being related to modern-day context. The story does not offer a tale between two binaries but rather a tale with a thin line between righteousness and resilience. By the deconstruction of the character Raavan, both Amish Tripathy and Anand Neelakantan have taken deconstruction and the reverence of Indian mythology to global literary discussions and platforms.

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