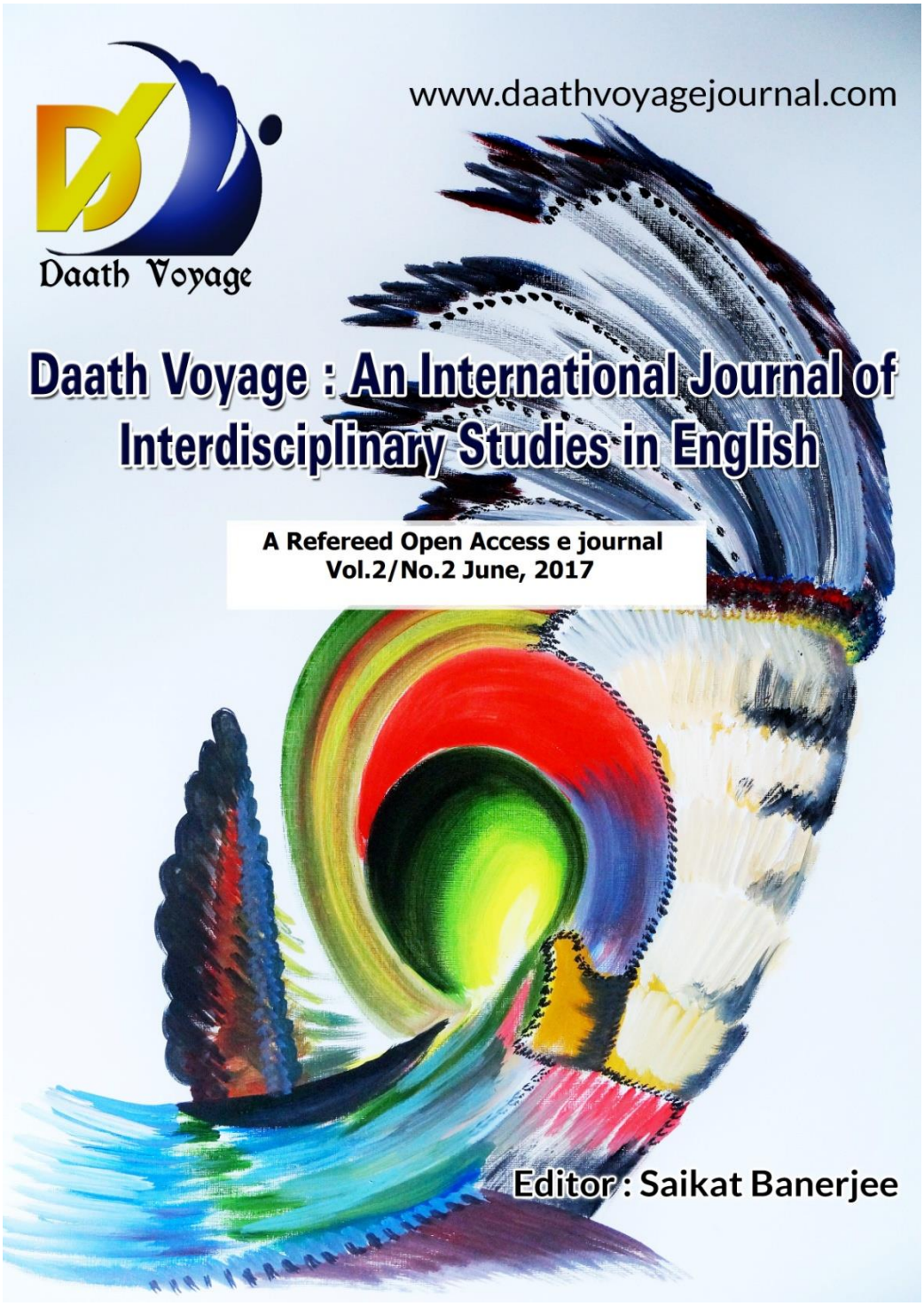

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Celebrating Silence and Otherness: A Reading of Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* and Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*

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Abstract The fixity of the binary opposition has often been challenged in literary ventures and the fluidity between the two poles blurring the line of separation has been attempted. Retelling Indian myths is one such genre where the writers have experimented with criss-crossing binaries. Many Indian authors off late have made huge success in reversing the age old order of good versus evil, breaking the larger than life image of Gods and sprinkling a more humane flavour to the so called demons. In this experimentation of fluid binary opposites, both history and mythology have been deconstructed. Some notable names in this new discourse of myth retelling are Ashok K Banker, Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelakantan, Devdutt Pattanaik, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane among others. Our paper is an attempt at critical engagements with the works of two such writers namely Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* and Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* and to analyse how both the writers have tried to unearth the voices of the silenced and the vanquished. In the first book, Kane tries to look at the unfolding of events from Suparnakha's perspective while Neelakantan's narrative is a gripping tale from Ravana's standpoint. The paper will further analyse if women's way of retelling is in any way different from their male counterparts.

Key words: Binary opposites, myth retelling, myth deconstructed, voices of the vanquished

In an article in *The Hindu* titled "Myth for Modern Times", the author, Anusha Parthasarathy, states that the meaning of the word mythology has been reworked by writers like Amish Tripathi. For Amish Tripathi, as stated in the article, "the very word mythology which is derived from the Greek term 'mythos' means to hide the truth and it is up to us to discover it through the story" (Parthasarathy). He further quotes Tripathi thus:

> Probably the only ancient civilization that has kept its myths alive even today is India. This is not because the other myths aren't as rich as ours but because we have understood the philosophy behind them. Myths are not about the stories but about the message you spread through them. And as societies and beliefs change, myths have to change along with them. Modernising and localising myths are ways of keeping them relevant in modern times. Otherwise, they would die out. Whether they would make them relatable is something readers will have to decide. (qtd. in Parthasarathy n.p.)

And indeed, 'modernising' and 'localising' myths have led to a new trend in Indian Writing in English, namely, retelling myth. Experimentation has invaded this new genre both in terms of theme, technique, subject matter and style. Sufficient liberty has been taken in terms of overturning the established hierarchy, introducing new voices and breaking stereotypes.

With the advent of post modernism and the breakdown of grand narratives, alternate narratives have made their presence felt. Retelling myth fits into such scheme of small narratives that can challenge the long standing hold of the Hindu myths as grand narratives. Many a contemporary writers have tried their hands in this genre where the established norms have been challenged and the great cause of *Dharma* or justice is looked at from different perspectives. Some of the prominent names that resonate in this new genre of retelling myth includes Ashok K Banker, Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelakantan, Devdutt Pattanaik, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane among others. It is also interesting to note how the women writers in their respective experimentation have tried to bring to the surface the otherwise

silent female voices from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. For instance, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her *Palace of Illusions* looks at the unfolding of the events at Kurukshetra from Draupadi's point of view; Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife* and *Sita's Sister* foreground the voices of Uruvi, Karna's wife and Urmila, Lakshman's wife and who subsequently present their own views on the events in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, presenting an alternate view and an alternate voice. These female voices are quite strong in questioning male patriarchy thereby breaking stereotypical ideals built up by the Indian myths. In Anand Neelakantan's works like *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* and *Ajeya: the Game of Dice*, we encounter a totally different approach in presenting the incarnation of evil. An altogether different perspective and trajectory is built in studying the good versus evil dichotomy. In this new discourse of retelling Indian myths, the writers have deconstructed both Indian history and the age old Indian perspective of victory of good over evil which has led to the breaking of the binary concepts. The long standing debate between good versus evil; right versus wrong; just versus unjust; brave versus cowardice; god versus demon has been put into an alternate trajectory where the fixity of the binary opposition has been challenged making room for fluidity between the right hand and left hand postulates, thereby challenging the superiority of the left hand side postulations. The application of postmodernist, deconstructivist and feminist approach in the study of myths has resulted in a new discourse of myth retelling. And the writers have in a consorted effort displaced the larger than life image of the gods coupled with a more humanely treatment of the demons.

The present paper will attempt to study Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* and Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* in the light of the trends that have emerged in this relatively new genre of retelling myth. The paper will try to establish that in their attempt to subvert the fixity of binary opposites, the authors have drawn insights from critical theories, such as postmodernism, feminism and deconstruction. The age old dichotomous assumption between good and evil have been made fluid as they do not remain fixed in water tight compartments of the binaries.

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> 'Yes, I am a monster!' screeched Meenakshi, her eyes flashing, baring her claws at her mother. 'See them? If anyone hurts me, I shall hurt them with these!! I am Surparnakha!' (Kane 9)

Surparnakha, Ravan's famous sister— ugly and untamed, brutal and brazen— this is often how she is commonly perceived. One whose nose was sliced off by Lakshman and the one who started a war. But, was she really just a perpetrator of war? Or was she a victim? Was she Lanka's princess? Or was she the reason behind its destruction? Surparnakha, which means the woman 'as hard as nails', was born as Meenakshi — the one with beautiful, fish-shaped eyes, is often the most misunderstood character in the *Ramayana*. Growing up in the shadow of her brothers, who were destined to win wars, fame and prestige, she, instead, charted out a path filled with misery and revenge. Accused of manipulating events between Ram and Ravan, which culminated into a bloody war and annihilation of her family, Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* makes us see the familiar events unfold through the eyes of a woman more hated than hateful.

Meenakshi, who was rechristened Surparnakha by Ravan in an early duel grew up with that hateful name only to reveal some hidden truths and unspoken episodes of the great epic. When Kuber's attempt to abduct Meenakshi was foiled by the latter's sharp attack with her nails, Kaikesi, Meenakshi's mother jeered at her husband, Rishi Vishravas' 'cowardliness' who stood helpless and defenceless throughout the entire drama of Kuber's attempted abduction. Meenakshi who always admired her father silently cursed her father's helplessness on that fateful day that fired a silver of red hot anger in her, sizzling with shame and hurt. He never made an attempt to rush to her aid as she had anticipated. He had stood silently, shocked but passive as his son (Kuber) had dragged her by her wrist and seized her. She hated to admit to herself that it was the same father who, laying aside pride, dignity and differences, had begged for Ravan's release from Kartiviryarjun. The realisation reverberated dully in her weeping mind: her father did not love her, as a father should, or as much as she loved him— so unquestioningly, so faithfully.

Throughout the novel, many a times, the trickery and the treacheries of the gods and rishis are revealed. One such example is when Kumbhakarna is tricked to his sleep. While Kubhakarna was to ask for the boon of Indraasan from Brahma, he asked for Nidraasan instead. In place of the high seat of Indra, Kumbha landed up asking for sleep. Having realised the slip, Kumbha intended to ask Nirdevatvam— the annihilation of the Devas— but instead ended up saying Nidravatvam— sleep. However, it was later found that this foul play was wrought by Indra who felt threatened by Kumbha's might. Indra felt so insecured by Kumbha's might that he beseeched Saraswati, the Lady of Knowledge, to confound Kumbha's tongue. Knowing this trickery Kaikesi, Ravan's mother burst out "This is outrageous ... And wicked and unfair ... But then, what do you expect from the devas and the rishis? ... They are infamously known to cheat when cornered, rather than battle it out!" (Kane 57).

In another such instance when Surparnakha in Dandak forest approaches Ram and Lakshman with an eye to seduce them, the duo toyed with her emotion each asking her to go to the other. She did accordingly without a morsel of doubt that she was actually being insulted by both Ram and Lakshman. As realisation dawned, she stood in the middle watching the two brothers, handsome and cruel, grinning surreptitiously, sharing a secret jest. She was the jest. As Ram beseeched Lakshman not to kill but maim her, she retorts back that it was the same pair who killed Taraka, her grandmother. And Surparnakha's introspection at this point is quite touching:

> Maim her, what weird barbarity was this and for what, she thought panicking. For displaying desire for these two handsome men? How could someone so beautiful be so ugly and cruel? What were they furious about— me attacking Sita or me assaulting their chastity, their moral righteousness? Was it their apprehension for my uninhibited behaviour, assuming it to be an overt vulgarity, an open display of unleashed carnal anarchy? Was that why they had laughed at me, ridiculing me in their contempt and amazement, their

> arrogant condescendence condemning me for my feminine profanities? (Kane 202)

As Surparnakha was lost in her thoughts, quick swishes from Lakshman's sword left her maimed— with her nose and ears cut. Her painful experience comes alive in Kane's words:

> Three odd bloody pieces of flesh and cartilage strewn carelessly in the dust. She stared at it confused and befuddled, the pain coursing through her, not allowing her to think. She touched her face again: it felt odd, her hands slipping off the wetness of her blood. She had no nose! She gasped in frenzied horror. Her frantic hands moved further over her ruined face...she felt no ear where it should be. Nor the other, her frightened mind whispered to her. She looked down comprehendingly. It was the straggly remains of her ears and her nose that were lying at her feet. It was then she screamed, her wail sailing through the still air. (Kane 203)

There are numerous instances in the book where the devas are accused of deviating from the path of righteousness— from the path of principles. Meghnad, Ravan's son is attacked by Lakshman with the aid of Vibhishan even before sunrise, before the time of battle, when the former was defenceless in his act of praying. This was, to use Surparnakha's words, "betrayal", "disloyalty", "treason", "murder" (Kane 259). Surparnakha also exposes the false ideals of piousness and virtuousness of the royalty pointing how Ram tried hard to prove his wife as 'pure and pious' in a trial by fire at Lanka. This was Ram's gift to Sita in freedom. Surparnakha rightly questions if it was freedom or humiliation? In spite of being an ideal and upright king, Ram compelled Sita to perform *Agnipariksha* to prove to the world that she was innocent, pure and untouched. Torn between being husband and king, the king in him took over to perform his duty even if it meant letting go of the woman he loved.

Such projections in the text make the fixed ideals showered on the gods and the demons take a middle point with the propensity of the ideals moving in either direction. The fluidity in the binary opposites lends a new flavour and a new angle to the established norms of the myths.

> I will never try to be a God. I will live exactly as my emotions tell me to. I do not want to be a model man for future generations to follow. My life begins with me and ends with me. But I will live my life to its full and die as a man should. So borrowing from your words, I shall be a man with ten faces – I am *Dasamukha*. (Neelakantan 41)

This is Ravan speaking in *Asura*, the Ravanayana by Anand Neelakantan, where the author has a different story to tell, the story of the dead and the vanquished. In this alternate version of the *Ramayana*, Neelakantan has chosen two asuras as his prime narrators: Ravan and Bhadra, voices that have so long remained suppressed and unheard. The accepted notions of good versus evil are throughout thwarted in the text making the binary opposites fluid and flexible. From the very beginning a contrasting picture is being presented of the devas and the asuras. In Chapter 2, Ravan laughs at the Brahmins as people who are no fools. They knew how to project even the mundane tasks of burning twigs as earth-shaking scientific discoveries and claimed to tame the forces that controlled the world. Ravan further observed that it was funny how majority of people like the carpenters, masons and farmers who were doing something meaningful, had become supplicant to these jokers croaking under the warm sun, sweat pouring from their faces in front of a raging fire and chanting God knows what. In contrast, the Asuras, according to Ravan, were a casteless society and had a highly democratic set up where an elected council, instead of a king, held actual power. They were a prosperous tribe and at a time when the kings of Egypt were busy building great tombs to bury themselves, the democratic council of the Asura kingdom was busy laying roads, building hospitals, drainage systems and everything they thought was useful for the people. Ravan too sarcastically observes how deva men did not honour their women enough in comparison to the asuras. The devas were trained to treat their women like worms. Ravan was courageous enough to declare that Ram and Lakshman made a strange pair in relation to their women – while one was willing to fight and kill thousands of men and women for the sake of a wife he had never wanted, the other left his wife to languish in his palace for fourteen long years.

When Queen Mandodari was abducted and molested by the Angada men, an ally of Ram against Ravan, the latter's true humane nature came to the fore. As the Queen was lying on the bare earth naked and unconscious, Ravan stood stunned, weeping silently. As she slowly regained consciousness, Ravan caught her in his arms and hugged her. As her nudity, shame and violation dawned on her, she let out an animal cry and tried to cover herself in a tattered and stinking shawl offered by Bhadra. As she tried to run out of shame, Ravan caught her arm and hugged her tightly. As she expressed her wish to die, Ravan assured Mandodari that she was his lawfully wedded wife and would remain so. Bhadra's appreciation of Ravan at this point bringing out the fragility of Ram in a similar situation is quite striking:

> ...I felt a growing admiration for the man who thus stood by his wife in her trial. As a ruler, nothing worse could have happened to him, not even his own death. The Queen was forever tainted and the easiest thing for him would have been to fling her away like a used rag. But he chose the tough way, to live with snickering subordinates who would make lewd comments about his wife the moment his back was turned. Perhaps, in such choices lay his greatness and also his weakness. At the time, I doubt whether I completely appreciated his gesture towards his violated Queen. It was later, much later, when I witnessed the behaviour of another man towards his chosen wife, in circumstance that were much less serious, that I understood why Ravana would never be deified. He was too humane to be God. (Neelakantan 393)

Ram's so called *Dharma* is once again exposed in the Shambuka episode. When Ram came across this fourteen year old untouchable reciting the Vedas, bringing in a threat to the rigid caste system of his land, Ram became furious. And an instigation by the head priest that such act of defiance has not only made a Shudra literate, but has made him literate in the Holy Vedas too, was enough to make Ram lose his temper with the result that he severed the head of Shambuka in an instant. In the name of protecting *Dharma*, this upright and ideal godly figure, thus, commits an inhuman act.

Thus, both Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* and Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* are an attempt to bring forth the voice of the vanquished that remains lost in silence. As the demons speak in both the texts, Surparnakha in *Lanka's Princess* and Ravan in *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, an alternate perspective is offered to the regular reading of the *Ramayana*, thereby establishing an alternate discourse of retelling myth. This new discourse has succeeded in deconstructing the godly image of Ram and at the same time lending a more humane image to the demons with their more human strength and weakness. These texts in the genre of retelling myths have broken the firmly established grounds of the binary opposites giving impetus to the fact that the binaries are not fixed domains, rather they are flexible and fluid. These texts fit into the paradigms established by the postmodernist critic, Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his book, *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard argues that postmodernism posits a threat to the meta or grand narratives that had so far provided the framework of human understanding. This new genre of retelling myth is also in tune with Ihab Hassan's postulations that postmodernism is an impulse of negation and unmasking, a celebration of silence and otherness that was always present, though always repressed. And indeed, Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* and Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* are milestones in unmasking the ideals that have so long been cherished while celebrating silence and otherness.

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