From Villain to Protagonist: Reimagining Ravana in Contemporary Indian English Literature

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Abstract—**Recent decades have witnessed a significant resurgence of mythological retellings in Indian English literature, marked by a deliberate shift in narrative perspective and moral emphasis. Among the most striking transformations is the reimagining of Ravana, the traditional antagonist of Valmiki's Ramayana, as a psychologically complex and ethically ambivalent protagonist. This article argues that contemporary rewritings of Ravana do not merely humanise a mythic villain but actively participate in a larger cultural project of counter-narration, wherein dominant epic histories are interrogated through the voices of the defeated and marginalised (Ramanujan 46). Analysing Amish Tripathi's Ravana: Enemy of Aryavarta, Anand Neelakantan's Asura: Tale of the Vanquished, Radha Vishwanath's Ravana Leela, and Gaurav Kataria's Ravana: A Mistaken King, An Unmistaken Leader, the study examines how mythopoesis, narrative reversal, and modern ethical sensibilities reshape Ravana into a tragic anti-hero. The article contends that while these retellings democratise myth by challenging moral absolutism, they also raise critical questions about relativism, power, and the limits of ethical reinterpretation.**

Index Terms—**Ravana; Ramayana; Indian English literature; mythological retellings; mythopoesis; counter-narrative; moral ambiguity**

I. INTRODUCTION

Myth, Modernity, and Counter-Narrative
Literature has traditionally functioned as a mirror of life, reflecting shifts in social values, ideological frameworks, and cultural anxieties across time (Abrams 178). Myth remains dynamic narrative material, acquiring new meanings when retold in different historical and cultural contexts (Frye 136). In Indian literary tradition, myths particularly epic narratives like the Ramayana have never remained static; they have been continually retold, adapted, and reinterpreted across regions, languages, and historical moments.

The twenty-first century has seen a renewed interest in mythological narratives within Indian English literature, driven by liberalisation, globalisation, and the expansion of a transnational reading public. Contemporary writers no longer approach myth as a sacred, inviolable text but as a flexible narrative framework open to interrogation. This shift has resulted in a marked transformation of epic antagonists, most notably Ravana, whose portrayal has moved from moral absolutism toward psychological complexity.

This article situates modern Ravana narratives within the framework of counter-epic writing and mythopoesis, arguing that these texts seek not merely to retell the Ramayana but to question how heroism, villainy, and dharma are constructed through narrative authority. By foregrounding Ravana's perspective, contemporary writers destabilise the epic's moral binaries and expose the politics underlying mythic representation.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Mythopoesis and Counter-Epic Writing
The reinterpretation of Ravana in modern literature can be productively understood through the concept of mythopoesis, which involves the creative reworking of myth to address contemporary ideological concerns (Frye 142). As Northrop Frye suggests, myth remains meaningful precisely because of its adaptability, allowing each age to reshape archetypes according to its moral imagination.

Equally relevant is the notion of counter-narrative, particularly as articulated in postcolonial and subaltern discourse. Counter-narratives challenge dominant histories by recuperating silenced or marginalised

voices. In the context of the Ramayana, Ravana represents the defeated antagonist whose story is subsumed under the victor's moral framework. Modern Ravana-centric narratives function as counter-epics that question the authority of canonical storytelling and reveal myth as a product of power, perspective, and selection.

III. RAVANA IN THE CLASSICAL RAMAYANA

Fixed Morality and Narrative Authority
In Valmiki's Ramayana (Narayan 2006), Ravana functions as the epic's moral opposite to Rama, embodying adharma through arrogance, desire, and transgression. His abduction of Sita becomes the ethical justification for his annihilation and the restoration of cosmic order. While classical texts acknowledge Ravana's scholarship, devotion to Shiva, and political prowess, these qualities remain subordinate to his moral failure.

The authority of the classical Ramayana lies in its narrative closure: Ravana's death resolves moral conflict and reaffirms dharma. Modern retellings disrupt this closure by reopening Ravana's story, treating his defeat not as moral certainty but as narrative convenience.

IV. RAVANA IN AMISH TRIPATHI'S RAVANA

Enemy of Aryavarta
Amish Tripathi's Ravana: Enemy of Aryavarta (2019) reconstructs Ravana as a psychologically and socially marginalised figure. Born a Naga and physically marked as different, Ravana experiences rejection that shapes his identity and fuels ambition. His transformation from outcast to king is portrayed as a product of social injustice and trauma rather than inherent evil (Tripathi).

A central theme in Amish's narrative is the social production of evil. Ravana's transformation is gradual and contextual, suggesting that power and cruelty emerge through lived injustice. His rise from outcast child to ruler of Lanka demonstrates intelligence, resilience, and political competence. Under his rule, Lanka becomes a prosperous and socially progressive state, complicating the epic's moral economy.

However, Amish does not romanticise Ravana uncritically. Ravana's emotional rupture following the death of Kanyakumari (Vedavati) marks his moral

hardening, transforming grief into vengeance. The novel further interrogates power through the figure of Vishwamitra, revealing how Ravana is strategically constructed as a villain within a larger ideological design. In this sense, Ravana becomes both agent and instrument of political myth-making.

Thus, Ravana emerges as a tragic anti-hero, whose greatness and flaws coexist, and whose choices shape both his destiny and the epic's moral landscape (Tripathi). The novel raises an uncomfortable question whether moral failure can be fully separated from social responsibility.

V. RAVANA IN ANAND NEELAKANTAN'S ASURA

Tale of the Vanquished
Anand Neelakantan's Asura: Tale of the Vanquished (2012) offers a radical counter-epic perspective, retelling the Ramayana from the viewpoint of Ravana and the defeated Asura civilisation (Neelakantan). The novel foregrounds caste and social inequality, portraying Ravana as a half-caste figure denied inheritance, education, and dignity. Anand contrasts the progressive, egalitarian Asuras with the hierarchical Devas, reframing the epic conflict as ideological and civilisational (Neelakantan).

Through dual narration Ravana and the low-caste Asura Bhadra the novel foregrounds caste, power, and historical silencing. Crucially, the novel refuses to idealise Ravana. Through Bhadra's voice, Anand exposes how Ravana reproduces oppressive hierarchies once he gains power. The reinterpretation of Sita as Ravana's daughter further destabilises moral binaries, reframing abduction as an act of protective desperation rather than lust (Neelakantan).

Asura ultimately suggests that history is a narrative of power, not truth. Ravana's tragedy lies not only in defeat but in his failure to escape the structures of domination he sought to dismantle.

Ravana In Ravana Leela
Radha Vishwanath's Ravana Leela (2007) offers a deeply introspective reimagining of Ravana by shifting the epic's narrative centre from Rama to his adversary. The novel's title itself signals a deliberate subversion of the traditional Ram Leela, foregrounding Ravana as the primary consciousness through which the events of the Ramayana are experienced. Rather than presenting Ravana as either

hero or villain, Vishwanath constructs him as a psychologically conflicted individual whose life is shaped by inherited trauma, ambition, and cosmic injustice.

A central thematic concern of Ravana Leela is emotional interiority. Vishwanath places sustained emphasis on Ravana's inner suffering his loneliness, resentment, and unfulfilled longing thereby transforming the epic into a study of subjective experience. Ravana's lineage plays a crucial role in shaping his destiny: born into a Rakshasa family marked by historical defeat and humiliation, he inherits a burden of loss transmitted through his mother Kaikesi and his grandfather Sumali. This inherited grievance fuels his obsession with reclaiming Lanka and restoring Rakshasa pride, suggesting that ambition in the novel is as much emotional inheritance as personal choice.

Vishwanath also foregrounds cosmic imbalance and injustice through the episode of Ravana's tapasya. Although Ravana performs severe penance to gain power, the unequal distribution of boons particularly Kumbhakarna's curse introduces a sense of arbitrariness in divine justice. This perceived injustice deepens Ravana's resentment toward both gods and fate, complicating the moral structure of the epic. Rather than presenting Ravana's aggression as gratuitous, the novel frames it as a response to systemic and cosmic inequities.

Narratively, Ravana Leela resists external moral judgement. Other characters remain peripheral, while Ravana's voice dominates the text, compelling readers to inhabit his perspective without the reassurance of epic closure. This narrative strategy destabilises the traditional good evil binary and presents the Ramayana as a selective narrative shaped by emphasis and omission. Ravana emerges as a tragic anti-hero whose downfall is inseparable from his emotional excess and unyielding ambition. Vishwanath's retelling thus underscores the idea that myth is not a moral monolith but a psychological and ideological construct shaped by perspective.

VI. RAVANA IN GAURAV KATARIA'S RAVANA

A Mistaken King, An Unmistaken Leader
Gaurav Kataria's Ravana: A Mistaken King, An Unmistaken Leader (2020) continues the contemporary project of rehabilitating Ravana but does so through a distinctly leadership-centred and ethical lens. Written as a first-person confession, the novel grants Ravana full narrative authority, allowing him to recount his life as ruler, strategist, and visionary. This narrative choice not only humanises Ravana but also positions him as a reflective subject capable of ethical self-assessment.

A dominant theme in Kataria's reinterpretation is leadership and governance. Ravana is portrayed as a self-made king whose rise is driven by discipline, intellect, and strategic foresight rather than divine sanction. Under his leadership, Lanka flourishes as a politically stable and culturally advanced kingdom, and Ravana is shown as a ruler deeply committed to the welfare of his people. Kataria's Ravana is thus defined not by demonic excess but by administrative competence, loyalty, and a strong sense of responsibility toward his subjects.

The novel carefully distinguishes between moral failure and leadership failure. Ravana is described as a "mistaken king" whose downfall arises from pride, inflexibility, and refusal to compromise, yet an "unmistaken leader" whose vision and dedication remain ethically intact. This distinction allows Kataria to critique Ravana's personal flaws without collapsing his entire identity into villainy. Pride, rather than cruelty or lust, emerges as Ravana's tragic flaw, aligning him with the classical tragic hero.

Kataria also revisits the controversial episode of Sita's abduction by portraying her as Ravana's daughter, thereby reframing the act as a tragic consequence of destiny and misunderstanding. This reinterpretation shifts the narrative from moral transgression to fatal inevitability, emphasising Ravana's entrapment within prophecy and fate. The novel thus replaces epic moral certainty with tragic determinism.

Through its confessional tone and ethical focus, Ravana: A Mistaken King, An Unmistaken Leader presents Ravana as a figure whose greatness and flaws coexist. Kataria's retelling reinforces the modern literary impulse to read myth not as divine judgement but as a human drama shaped by choice, pride, and consequence.

Comparative Synthesis
While all four texts rehabilitate Ravana, they do so through distinct lenses:

- Amish Tripathi foregrounds psychological trauma and political manipulation.
- Anand Neelakantan emphasises caste, ideology, and historical silencing.
- Radha Vishwanath explores emotional interiority and tragic consciousness.
- Gaurav Kataria focuses on leadership, ethics, and fate.

Together, these portrayals reveal Ravana not as a singular new hero but as a multiplicity of figures reflecting contemporary concerns about morality, justice, and perspective (Frye 142).

VII. CONCLUSION

The transformation of Ravana from villain to protagonist in contemporary Indian English literature reflects a broader cultural shift toward ethical ambiguity and narrative plurality (Ramanujan 46). While these retellings democratise myth and amplify marginalised voices, they also raise critical questions: if every antagonist is humanised, does myth lose moral authority, or does it gain ethical depth? Modern Ravana destabilises moral certainty, reaffirming myth as an evolving narrative space that mirrors society's struggle with justice, power, and empathy (Frye 142).

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