

# Oral Traditions and the Counter-Narrative: Reading Anand Neelakantan's *Valmiki's Women: Five Tales from the Ramayana* for Contrarian Mythology

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## Abstract

One often questions whether myth, history and folklore are dichotomous or do these encompass and circumscribe everything we know today. Myth and history are interdependent and folklore is a broader term that includes everything that is passed down through generations. Getting to their very core is essential for unearthing what differences or similarities they hold. India is a country with a rich culture, dating thousands of years back. What keeps its culture still alive is its history along with mythology and folklore, travelling across centuries mostly through oral traditions. Today, when everything is documented and scrutinized rationally, oral traditions strike us as an unconventional approach and compel us to question their credibility as a well-founded source for re-visiting and re-presenting history. Myth and folklore are the most ancient form of narratives, wherein transmission and participation for meaning-making are important elements. Such a transmission of cultural items makes for a rich trajectory of the oral tradition as a literary form. Understanding recorded/ written history alongside the literary corpus of myth and folklore promises to be an intriguing journey. The paper proposes to examine how oral traditions help in continuing the legacy of myth, history and folklore, even as these are inextricably intertwined. A few stories, from the collection entitled *Valmiki's Women.....* (2021) by Anand Neelakantan, would be taken up to show how mythological fiction affords both a creative and a critical space for counter-histories to emerge, especially when read from the standpoint of the antagonists or the supporting characters from a larger work.

**Keywords:** Contrarian Mythology; Counter Narrative; Culture; Folklore; Historical Myths; Marginality; Mythology; Oral Traditions.

## **Introduction**

The ever appealing ancient times have always been the intriguing areas where people often find themselves among the coalescence of myth, history and folklore. This fusion serves as a base that helps us to gain perspective and to configure today's modern world. India is a country with a rich culture, dating thousands of years back. What keeps this culture flourishing is its history coupled with mythology that travels across ages mostly through oral traditions. One often questions whether myth, history and folklore are dichotomous or do these encompass and circumscribe everything we know today. Getting to their nucleus is essential for uncovering what differences or similarities they hold.

### **Myth: A focal point of culture**

For understanding any society, first question that one asks is what is culture? Culture is the foundation of human kind, and the entire civilization revolves around culture. Can it be defined? Pramod K Nayar, in his book *An Introduction to Cultural Studies*(2016), defines culture and tries to explain what culture meant earlier and the meaning it carries now. He says, "What 'culture' has meant before:

- 'Culture' derives from 'cultura' and 'colere,' meaning 'to cultivate.'
- It also meant 'to honour' and 'protect'
- By the nineteenth century in Europe it meant the habits, customs and tastes of the upper classes (also known as the elite).
- What 'culture' means now in Cultural Studies:
- 'Culture' is the mode of generating meanings and ideas.
- This 'mode' is a negotiation over which meanings are valid.
- Meanings are governed by power relations.
- . . .that certain components of culture get more visibility and significance. (4)

The definition clearly indicates Nayar's motive in understanding the dynamic nature of culture and its role in 'generating meanings and ideas,'

and also the pivotal role that power plays in controlling the meanings and ideas within a culture. In *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: . . .* (2011), Jain states, "Culture is one category that goes on to influence all facets and aspects of life---behaviour, relationships, identities, responses and epistemologies. How we 'know' and respond to the outside world is governed in large measures by cultural constructs" (1).

Nature of culture could be very well understood from the above definitions. Culture is dynamic and cultural constructs that seem natural are actually society-made and vary across cultures. These constructs are volatile and evolve with change in time. Cultural constructs or cultural norms heavily govern human interaction. The influence that culture exerts on people is manifested through their behavior, thinking, attitude, relationships, and even through their rituals, beliefs etc. An important component of any culture is its Folklore. Theodor H Gaster, in a paper titled, "Definitions of Folklore" defines folklore as ". . . that part of a people's culture which is preserved, consciously or unconsciously, in beliefs and practices, customs and observances of general currency; in myths, legends and tales of common acceptance; and in arts and crafts which express the temper and genius of a group rather than of an individual" (258).

This is corroborated by D. K. Bhattacharya in his essay, "Studying Folklore: the Indian Experience," wherein he exerts the real relationship between culture and folklore: "Culture is a non-tangible reality, but folklores which articulate the core of a culture is made tangible by vibrant rituals involving the community and thus take care of social stress" (6). The above definitions clearly exhibit the societal need of folks (people) to be connected via shared beliefs, ideas, and traditions etc., which collectively form a culture; and these shared beliefs and ideas are so ingrained in human psyche that these form a collective identity. To keep this identity alive through culture is the primary function of a community; hence, folklores are transferred through generations in multiple forms.

Every civilization turns towards its folk culture for sustenance, as it serves various functions—from entertainment to being didactic. A salient aspect of folklore is mythology. What does mythology comprise of? Is myth different from mythology? These are the questions that always beset people. Mythology is the collection of myths; it is the systematic analysis and study of myths. On the other hand, myths are the stories based on traditions, stories meant to explain natural events or to justify religious beliefs or social customs. No matter how rationally we think, we are always drawn back to myths. Decoding myths to get meanings is well discussed

in a paper titled, "The Mytho-epic Re-imagination."

All cultures have been built upon myths. Each nation has its own peculiar epics and every society derives its cultural ethos from its myths, legends and folklore. Mythology typically explained and justified the pre-scientific view of things. When scientific development had not been able to sufficiently explain the extra-natural, people resorted to deciphering their myths in an attempt to find answers (Jha 188).

Myth- till date is a word that arouses profound interest among people and deep desire among scholars to explore and dwell further into its realm. Renowned critics and authors have tried to explain myth for us to be conscious of its importance and relevance today. Northrop Frye describes two aspects of myth, in his book *The Great Code*(1982), one is its story structure, which attaches to literature and the other is its social function as concerned knowledge, which is important for the society to know (32-33). Devdutt Pattanaik defines myth and mythology in his book *Myth=Mithya*, "If myth is an idea, mythology is the vehicle of that idea. Mythology constitutes stories, symbols and rituals that make a myth tangible" (14). These definitions help one to recognize the meaning and significance of myth. As myth travels from the past to the present so as history. Is the connection or differentiation between the two easy to comprehend?

### **Myth and History**

A skeptical ground on which people frequently debate is the relation between myth and history, both of which are interdependent. They are part of narrative culture or popularly known as verbal narrative. The origin of myths is unknown but these mostly tell what men must do. History, on the other hand, is majorly documented and talks more about what men did. These both mirror culture in any particular society. On the one hand where history answers pivotal questions of life, in-depth meanings and explanations could only be derived out of myths. Without myth, history is baseless and without history, understanding myth is difficult. They are part of a single tree, where folklores are the deep roots holding the existence of mankind firmly, and history and myths are its branches, spreading and developing continually till today. Connection between myth and history can be understood from a book titled, *Myth and History in Contemporary Indian Novel in English*(2000):

Myth mediates history with a modernizing relevance. Myth is

used as a standard bearer at the operational level against which modernity is tested efficaciously. The novelists present a perspectival truth with a perspectivised view of history. To them reality is a question of perspective. They seek to present reality with a poetic overdrive making sportive flights from history. (Rao xii)

Myths link past with the present, hence, making history look relevant. Myths serve as tools to measure modern ideas. Now, the question arises- should myth be taken as a reliable and operational tool to test and verify contemporary ideas and problems? Assuming that reality is subject to perspective, writers blend history with myth along with creativity and that often opens field of new perspectives and interpretations.

Understanding myth as traditional history leads to more credence among people. *Historical Myths*, such as *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* are said to be documented by Rishi Valmiki and Rishi Ved Vyas respectively and the preponderance of these have led to their myriad versions, transmitted orally, in different cultures of the Indian society and even beyond India. The passage from myth to history is so smooth and nanoscopic that it's difficult to differentiate between the two.

Wisdom passed down through generations in various forms, tangible or intangible, is folklore. Folklore recognizes itself with culture. It is shared by the people belonging to a particular community and includes everything from tales to proverbs, to songs, to rituals, to customs and traditions. This could be associated with a grapevine communication, and it is practiced to reinforce harmony and identity within a community/culture. Oral traditions function at grassroots level, where by studying and understanding these, one could get a peek into the true essence of a community and how it functions.

### Oral Tradition: A Rhizome

Stories, whether local, regional or national, survive through narration and spread like rhizome. This oral tradition gives veracity to myths. In present scenario, where documentation takes precedence over oral narration, this narration serves as a shared culture- where memory plays a vital role. At times, in the process of this verbal narration, certain things are either omitted or added, to make these stories find a firm grounding in a particular culture/society. Foremost function of a society's oral tradition is to circulate knowledge. This oral tradition has widely emerged as a popular literary form. Though these narratives are not well-structured, it is pre-

cisely this aspect which works, as these narrations are open to various interpretations and analyses. This essential aspect of oral culture is well demonstrated in a paper entitled, "The Art of Rewriting Indian Epics," . . . the act of retelling a story is the only way of communicating and transferring ideas through generations. As a result, the alterations and modifications that occur during oral retellings tend to be extemporaneous and accidental: . . . (Sharma 148). Hence, furthering the legacy of myths, history and folklore - by revisiting these and deriving new morals and meanings - have led to their re-presentation in literature.

Meaning-making of a text requires a contribution where the writer and the reader both function together. It is an analytical process that has extended the horizon of knowledge and enlightenment. Readers' understanding of a story helps them to understand their culture better along with the knowledge gained by their own experiences. A story could be interpreted in numerous ways and each interpretation and its effect on readers differs. The traditional way of storytelling, with one protagonist and an antagonist, has always been prevalent, creating a clear binary between good and evil. However, contemporary writers are handling the traditional storytelling way differently, which has led to "counter narration."

### **The Counter Narrative**

Indian mythology has a universal acceptability. Its profusion of themes and narrations have etched permanent impression on the Indian literature. Hence, myths have always found expression in stories and novels, whether ancient or modern. Everyone has grown reading and listening to stories from *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata*, even *The Jataka Tales* and stories from *The Panchatantra*. The very innovative and creative use of mythological stories could be seen in the works of contemporary writers - especially novelists - who are taking a fresh take on mythology. Why is the recasting of myths in contemporary novels so intriguing? Why are the voices of the marginalized being heard now? These are some questions the answers to which point to the significance of mythological fiction in affording both a creative and a critical space for counter-histories to emerge, especially when understood from the standpoint of the antagonists or the supporting characters from a larger work, as something 'new'.

Many writers have attained popularity with their modern approach in literature. Among such modern writers is Anand Neelakantan, who is also a columnist, screenwriter and even a public speaker. He is known for mythological fictions and his retellings come with such a new version and

interpretation of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* that bring into light, the plight of the lesser-known characters in the epics. He does so to project the rational viewpoint of the characters, via counter narratives. Among his mythological fictions is *Valmiki's Women: Five Tales from the Ramayana*—a book that discusses minor women characters from the epic and takes a contrarian view. This new projection of the epic compels the readers to get into the minds of those who were not given center stage.

This counter narrative allows minor characters to narrate their own stories, and this further leads to alternative viewpoints that helps to represent their grim actualities. Is counter narrative important? The answer is simple—before being evil or rakshasi, they were women. Their life experiences and their emotions too deserve platform. No one ever thought how the actions of the great men have destroyed the souls of these women, who did nothing wrong but just followed their hearts. Reading mythology from contrasting standpoints has paved the way for “contrarian mythology,” a new and better way of knowing and understanding everyone’s viewpoint.

### Contrarian Mythology

In the stories of *Valmiki's Women* . . . , there is no black-or-white, and the line of difference between a ‘hero’ and a ‘villain’ is blurred. Neelakantan’s contrarian mythology is an eye-opener for those who thought of Soorpanakha as a rakshasi, Tataka or popularly known as Tadaka as an ugly, rapacious demon and a cannibal. Nobody knows that Lord Rama had an elder sister, Devi Shanta, who was given for adoption by King Dasharatha and Kaushalya in their dire desire to have a male child, the king of Ayodhya. So, what is ‘contrarian’? It simply means holding a position contrary to a widely-accepted opinion; a stance that the majority rejects. Contrarian mythology is thus a whole new approach, which is used to trace the life-course of those whose voices went unheard, but whose latent roles were important enough in the making of the epic.

This paper is devoted to an understanding of the aspect and use of contrarian mythology in *Valmiki's Women*.... . Feminine voices are astonishingly absent from the traditional versions of our epics. Of late, some writers have attempted to correct the imbalance, writing *The Ramayana* from Sita’s perspective or *The Mahabharata* in Draupadi’s voice. Neelakantan brings to life five powerful women from the well-known epic. The insightful story entitled “Shanta” voices the pain and dejection of a daughter, who her entire life longs for the love and approval of her father. Though being a princess of Ayodhya, she always found comfort in the mountains,

away from the grandiose of her father's palace. "Here, on the rock that jutted out of the hill, she felt comforted. Unlike the towering pillars of her father's palace that loomed large over everything, quite like centuries-old traditions they seemed to represent, here everything was iridescent and expansive" (23).

It bothered her immensely that her existence was almost negligible in the patriarchal society where an absence of a male child was taken as being childless. "People spoke in hushed whispers that the famous clan of Raghuvanshi was accursed and King Dasharatha was destined to die childless. It did not matter that Kaushalya had given birth to Shanta. She did not count. She was just a girl" (28). This same yearning for a son is witnessed in the life of famous Yaksha Suketu, who performed great austerities for procreating a son. Though Tataka was a special girl, who was born with the immense strength of a thousand elephants, still this couldn't change anything in Suketu's longing for a son. "Grandpa Suketu had always wanted a boy, but Tataka was the only child he ever had. It took many years for him to come to terms with his fate" (170). Standing of women in Indian society has always been debatable. Discussing the position of women in India, in an essay entitled, "The Changing Status of Women in India," the author comments:

The traditional position of women in Indian society is very difficult to ascertain due to lack of historical date. However, in ancient India the position of a woman in society was low as revealed from various literatures. Her roles in the society were not considered as important and, therefore, she was not required to actively participate in any socio- political and religious occasions and perform any roles. (Bhadra 212)

Women, irrespective of the era they are born, have always been subject to ill fate. They have been cursed and blamed innumerable times for the events happening around them, yet they are used and assigned different roles for the convenience of a man. They have always been objectified, either as seductress or called a man-eater. Sometimes used as mere shield to ward off an evil or called evil themselves.

Rama's elder sister, Devi Shanta, found voice in "Shanta." Her journey of life is meticulously presented by Neelakantan. Her whole life, she tried to please her father. She abided by every wish of King Dasharath, even accepted her adoption by King of Anga, who later sent her to seduce rishi Rishyasringa. Shanta, the unwanted child, came in handy when King



Dasharath wished to make use of her in fulfilling his dream. Shanta was given for adoption for a *noble cause* and that would ultimately result in a male child for Dasharath. "Romapada will tell you what you have to do. You should be proud that you have been selected for such a noble task" (33). Not to disappoint her father, Shanta accepted the adoption. Even this submissive attitude of Shanta couldn't get her any respect. King Dasharath commented, "Sage Vashishta has told me that this act will bless me with a son. At least you will be of some use" (33).

Shanta's longing for Dasharatha's love did come to an end, when on his death bed, Dasharatha mistook her for Rama and showed her affection. Shanta suffered immensely due to lack of love and respect. This deep void in her life was finally filled by Rishyasringa's love. Shanta came to know what real love meant only after her marriage.

A woman's identity is recognized by her husband's reputation. This notion is quite clear from these stories. Tataka, the only child of Suketu, lost all her father's love and hope after she married a Gandharva named Sunda. Suketu broke every connection with Tataka after her union with a Gandharva, and even cursed her of being unhappy her entire life. "Sunda! Pah! Is that even a name? You will never know happiness with that stupid nomad . . ." (170).

Shanta, on the other hand, attained a motherly position for her father, after marrying a guru. The love and respect that she longed her entire life was experienced by Shanta on her return to Ayodhya with Rishiyasringa. With the intention of seeking blessings from her father, Shanta when touched his feet, Dasharatha got extremely horrified and scared of an ill-fate befalling him. "She stepped forward and bent to touch Dasharatha's feet. He recoiled and said in a horrified voice, 'Mother, what are you doing?'" (55) On this, Rishi Vashishta said, "You were given away for adoption and now you have returned as the wife of the priest who shall conduct the yajna. The king is right. You are akin to his mother" (55). This compels one to think about the volatile position of women, which clearly relies on the societal standing of their husbands. Being a daughter is not sufficient for social acceptance.

Anand Neelakantan's portrayal of Shanta is really heart touching and at times heart wrenching. A daughter's endless efforts, throughout her life, to get some affection of her father shows no matter how much a woman tries, it was and would always be difficult for her to break through the fetters of the norms set by society. Hardly anyone is aware of the real name

of Soorpanakha; her mother named her Meenakshi, one with beautiful eyes, and the eyes were the only thing left on her face. The story entitled “Meenakshi” unveils the real ordeal of Soorpanakha, after her face was mutilated by Laxmana. What was her fault? Her only fault was her love for Rama, and the display of that love costs her dignity and her beauty. Could this situation not have been handled in a more gentle way, where a woman’s self-respect would not have been severed?

An article, “Women In Hindu Mythology: Is Their Space Too A Myth?” tries to interrogate the bias against women that seems to rely upon *dharma* and *adharma*:

Women who abide by their *naari dharma*, suffer injustice with a silent dignity, and keep loving their husbands despite all that they go through are glorified. At the same time, other women, women who don’t conform to these structures are demonised. Given the slightest hint of agency, they are branded as infidels, corrupted women, who lead to the downfall of dharma. What is the difference between the violence faced by Sita and Surpanakha? What makes Sita’s abduction unacceptable, but the cutting off of Surpanakha’s nose praiseworthy? Are these women really that different? Or is this simply a case of propriety and caste? (Kriti)

This clearly questions the discrimination, between Sita and Soorpanakha, governed by social hierarchy and patriarchal control. This simply indicates that women who are epitome of *naari dharma* are eulogized, idealized; whereas, women who show autonomy and reflect agency are subject to violence and disgrace. The need now is to question this prejudice and to try find those socially accepted reasons that form the bases for such discriminations.

Soorpanakha’s agony could be felt when she met a chandali, who wasn’t aware of her identity.

It seemed the chandali hadn’t heard the stories that the priests sang in praise of their lord. In those, she was a demon with talons instead of nails, and had sharpened canines for teeth. She had horns growing from her head of curly hair; she was dark and ugly, . . . The wandering minstrels sang about her tall and hefty form and her large breasts sagging down to her stomach. If not for the valiant Lakshmana who had cut off her ear, nose and offending breasts, she would have eaten up their queen, and evil would have spread across the world (213-14).

An example of how oral traditions work their way could be understood from this incident involving Soorpanakha, wherein her identity is constructed on the basis of the songs of the priests. Stories have always portrayed Soorpanakha as a nefarious woman; however, nobody ever gave a thought on how she lived her whole life with such disfigured face. Despite being the only sister of the three princes of Lanka, Soorpanakha never felt respectable and loved, and after what Laxmana did to her, she was at the centre of people's hatred: "She always felt like a worm in a putrid drain.

Right from her childhood, when she was the only sister to three hot-headed brothers; in the palace of Lanka.... or in the streets that she roamed endlessly after the brother of a god had cut off her nose, ears and breasts. She was just insignificant, much like a worm" (209). Her miseries thus find voice in the story where she is seen pining for the scent of a flower, of sandalwood perfume. By disfiguring her face and body, Laxmana not only mangled her identity and her dignity but also deprived her of all motherly things: "She wanted to hold the baby, to feel its hungry mouth on her nipple, but she told herself it did not matter; nothing mattered" (215). Soorpanakha laments the plight of women at the hands of men. "Men have done worse to women. What is one Meenakshi with her mutilated face in the great order of things?" (219)

Another example of the significance of oral tradition could be noted from the story *Tataka*, where Maricha (son of Tataka) was dying and thought of being immortal through the songs that were to be shared by the coming generations. "The magic of destiny was working. He had led an unremarkable life, but his death would find a place in all the songs forever. And yes, this song would be remembered by all the civilized folk, for it had blood and gore, enough and more" (206).

## Conclusion

For generations these stories have been travelling, disseminating the vicious roles of antagonists and how they impede the holy paths of the great men. Did you ever wonder, had there been no Soorpanakha and Tataka, how would have we known the greatness of Laxmana along with Lord Rama? Had there been no Shanta, whom would have King Dashrath given for adoption in begetting Rama? So, what then is the rationale for revisiting their stories? Through an essay entitled, "Mahabharata Myths in Contemporary Writing: Challenging Ideology," Kiran Budkuley tries to justify the rewriting of myths- "... myths continue to inspire/provoke the contemporary writer's creative impulse and pose for him/her the chal-

lenge of analyzing, questioning, countering or subverting their apparent and/or concealed ideology by re-working or re-visioning the myth/s in question" (16).

Each of the stories from *Valmiki's Women* . . .invites the readers to look at these women anew as lovers, sisters, wives and mothers who are shown to hold a complex epic together. The importance of contrarian mythology lies in the fact that it gives a fierce voice to the marginalized, oppressed and dejected characters in mythology.....in this case, women characters who are caught between the grand machinations of kings and gods but who end up shaping the epic story in their own unique way. We thus find the author's representation, contrarian to the core, replete with his trademark irreverence and wicked wit but, at the same time, full of sensitivity and empathy, as he goes about his literary business of re-tellings in the mytho-fiction genre.

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