

Chapter Three:

Myth as Refraction in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English

The chapter analyses selected contemporary novels that use myth in a prominent way. The methodological framework related to refraction developed in chapter two is applied to the study and exegesis of the texts of Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanaik, Ashok K Banker, Nilanjan P Choudhuri, Chitra Banerjee, and Anand Neelakantan. The novels are analysed as refractions with reference to the rhetoric devices like isomorphism, text-within-the-text, inverse image, iconic rhetoric, explosion and unpredictability, semiosphere and refraction etc.

The three volumes of Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* (2010-2013) - *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), *The Secret of the Nagas* (2012) and *The Oath of Vayuputras* (2013) are examples of refraction wherein the myth of Lord Shiva is presented as modern day story of a more human Shiva, devoid of his divinity, crusading against evil. Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* (2008) presenting the inverted gender roles of men and women is very crucial in the contemporary society. The novel recounts number of characters and reimagines their stories in terms of gender discrimination and gender stereotypes. Using the theory of Inverse Image of Lotman, the novel creates an opportunity to break the stereotypes of gender and carry it beyond the male/ female binary. Besides, the book like *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata* (2010) by Devdutt Pattanaik is a retelling of the grand epic as its title mentions. Ashok Banker's *Vengeance of Ravana* (2012) is read as refraction with its mingling of magic and science. A great many similarities are visible between this text and western fantasy thrillers. *Bali and the Ocean of Milk* (2011) by Nilanjan

Choudhury reimagines the myth of the churning of the ocean. It translates the ancient myth into the modern day language of youth. Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) is a retelling of *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective. The close reading of the text reveals the issues of caste and gender. The concepts like 'text within a text', 'isomorphism', and 'core-periphery' are useful in analyzing the novel. Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012) subverts the myth of the *Ramayana* in the voice of two major characters Bhadra and Ravana.

***The Shiva Trilogy* by Amish Tripathi**

Comprising of three volumes viz. *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, and *The Oath of Vayuputras*, the Shiva Trilogy exemplifies the translation of age old mythology into new improvised language of the present scientific era. The Trilogy proves to be a good example of refraction in terms of Lefevere. The old mythological descriptions of magic and supernatural powers are given scientific overtones. Most of the scenes in the trilogy seem to be borrowed from western fantasy and thrillers. It takes the idea of abandoning the physically deformed from the film – *300 Spartans* (2007), the concept of destroying the evil that exists within us from the film trilogy – *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), the idea of Branga people and the Gates from TV series the *Game of Thrones* (2011-), and also borrows the concept of Liger – the offspring of Tigress and Lion from *X-Men* (2000) etc. These are the translations from the visual world of Hollywood cinema into the written domain in terms of Lotman. The characters from these visual media are taken and recreated in the medium of writing.

The Shiva Trilogy explores and recreates the significant ancient myth of Lord Shiva – the Lord of the Lords – with familiar characters and different themes

intertwined with the use of modern language and context. The trilogy retells the emergence of the central character Shiva as Mahadev. It allows to explore intericasis of the language and its deep-rooted evolution to comprehend the linkages among myths and the development of new sensibilities in the era of globalization. The myth of Suryavanshi and the Chandravanshi intermingle in newly invented style. It also amalgamates science, religion, culture, history and many other human sciences on the whole.

The action of the novel *The Immortals of Meluha*, is set in 1900 BC at Mansarovar Lake, at the foot of Mount Kailash, Tibet almost 4000 years ago. Shiva, the leader of the Guna tribe, tired of fights and quarrels with the neighboring tribes, thinks of a new way of life of peace and harmony. The seeds of globalisation can be found in the thoughts of the hero in the exposition of the novel. He remembers the offer by Nandi, who at the time was his prisoner,

Come to our land. It lies beyond the great mountains. Others call it Meluha. I call it Heaven. It is the richest and most powerful empire in India. Indeed the richest and most powerful in the whole world. Our government has an offer for immigrants. You will be given fertile land and resources for farming. Today, your tribe, the Gunas, fight for survival in this rough, arid land. Meluha offers you a lifestyle beyond your wildest dreams. We ask for nothing in return. Just live in peace, pay your taxes and follow the laws of the land. (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 02)

The government offers an ideal and conflict-free life to the immigrants. Apart from that they are accepted in Meluha completely. They will be given Somras – the divine drink – that would postpone their aging and death. The words of the foreigner

echo continuously in the mind of Shiva and force him to accept the offer. The idea of migration enters in the initial part of the novel. He accepts the offer of Nandi to migrate to Meluha.

Meluhans define themselves as the descendants of Suryavanshi and they consider themselves above all others especially Nagas, Gunas and Chandravanshis. A perfect kingdom – Meluha defines itself by its modified caste system and economic system. Meluhans have a set of festivals and other occasions for entertainment. They have their own rituals, pujas, ceremonies, festivities, art etc. that speaks volumes about a complete culture. The system was introduced by Lord Ram. His reign was known as “‘Ram Rajya’ or ‘the rule of Ram’ certain bunch or principles on which the empire must be administered in order to create a perfect life for the citizens” (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 35). Meluha is a kind of a Utopia, a perfect system. The country is governed with certain ideologies in terms of caste and creed. They must be observed by every Meluhan, immigrant or native. The land has its own army comprising of the people called Kshatriyas. The pattern of the rank of soldiers is similar to our modern one. It includes Captain, Brigadier and General. The soldiers are classified by their skills, bravery, and discipline.

Narration of Meluha’s infrastructure is done using architectural and scientific terminology. The description of bathroom (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 22) and drainage system gives complete resemblance of modern facilities and comforts. The description of roads, ships, dams etc. are the examples of excellence of meluhan architecture. The cities like Srinagar, Hariyupa and Devagiri are raised on heavy platforms. The description of various platforms is eye catching. When Shiva’s entourage reached

Devagiri, the Meluhan Capital city, Shiva was stunned by the grandeur and beauty of the magnificence of the architecture.

Like all Meluhan cities, Devagiri too was built on giant platforms, an effective protection against floods and a sturdy defense against enemies. However, where Devagiri was different from other Meluhan cities was in its sheer size. The city sprawled over three giant platforms, each of them spreading over three hundred and fifty hectares, significantly larger than other cities. The platforms were nearly eight metres high and were bastioned with giant blocks of cut stone interspaced with baked bricks. Two of the platforms, named *Tamra* and *Rajat*, literally, *bronze* and *silver*, were for the common man, whereas the platform named *Svarna* or *gold* was the royal citadel. The platforms were connected to each other by tall bridges, made of stones and baked bricks, which rose above the flood plains below.

Along the periphery of each enormous platform were towering city walls, with giant spikes facing outwards. There were turrets at regular intervals along the city walls from where approaching enemies could be repelled. This spectacle was beyond anything that Shiva had ever seen. In his mind, the construction of a city like this must truly be man's greatest achievement. (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 60-61)

Science has an important role in the formation of the land of Meluha. The novel scientifically explains a number of processes like effects of somras in our body, Shiva's third eye, his blue throat and even the side effects of somras are explained in the language of chemical reactions. While describing the Mandar and the experiments, the author uses many terms from chemistry. Brahaspati, who is the Guru of Devas in

mythology, is presented as a Chief scientist of the empire. He conducts many scientific experiments. Explication of weakening of human body by Brahaspati to Shiva is done in scientific terms. He is the one who controls the activities on Mount Mandar to manufacture Somras. The manufacturing process of Somras is depicted in scientifically. Somras is refracted and presented as the drink that removes oxidants from our body hence postpones aging and death. The process is narrated by him as follows:

The thing (oxygen) that keeps us alive is also what causes us to age and eventually die. When oxygen reacts with our food in order to release energy, it also releases free radicals, called oxidants. These oxidants are toxic. When you leave any fruit out and it becomes rancid, this is because it has been ‘oxidised’ or the oxidants have reacted with it to make it rot. A similar ‘oxidising process’ causes metals to corrode. It happens especially with the new metal we have discovered – iron. The same thing happens to our body when we breathe in oxygen. The oxygen helps convert the food we eat into energy. But it also causes the release of oxidants into our body which start reacting inside us. We rust from the inside and hence age and eventually die. (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 134)

In *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, there is a description of Lord Shiva’s weapon ‘Pashupatiatra’ and Brahmastra (and Vaishnavastra) – as weapons of mass destruction. Both are compared with their ability to destruct. The weapons are described and given the justification that resembles today’s nuclear weapons. They are called daivi astras but the effect is enough to convince one that they are the weapons of the demons.

Brahmastra... is too uncontrollable. It destroys anything and everything. Most importantly, its effect spreads out in circles. The worst destruction is in the epicentre, where everything living is instantly incinerated into thin air. While there is less destruction in the outer circles, the damage is still significantly widespread in the vicinity. So even if those outside the primary impact zone are not immediately killed, they suffer from the immense radiation unleashed by the astra.

The Pashupatiastra. It is a weapon designed by Lord Rudra. It has all the power of the Brahmastra, but with much greater control. Its destruction is concentrated in the inner circle. Life outside this zone is not impacted at all. In fact, with the Pashupatiastra, you can even focus the effect in only one direction, leaving everyone else in the other directions safe. (*The Oath of the Vayuputras*, 401-402)

The Pashupatiastra was a pure nuclear fusion weapon, unlike the Brahmastra and the Vaishnavastra which were nuclear fission weapons. In a pure nuclear fusion weapon, two paramanoos, the smallest stable division of matter, are fused together to release tremendous destructive energy. In a nuclear fission weapon, anoos, atomic particles, are broken down to release paramanoos, and this is also accompanied by a demonic release of devastating energy. Nuclear fission weapons leave behind a trail of uncontrollable destruction, with radioactive waste spreading far and wide. A nuclear fusion weapon, on the other hand, is much more controlled, destroying only the targeted area with minimal radioactive spread. (*The Oath of the Vayuputras*, 541)

The logic of the third eye of Shiva is also explicated with the theory of brain and its hemispheres. In his early age, Shiva had burning pain between his eyes. He was given some kind of medicine to reduce the pain by his uncle Manobhu. The part of burning took the shape of vertical eye. Gopal explains not only the logic of the third eye, but also the extraordinary effect of somras on Shiva.

The Parihan system of medicine believes that the pineal gland, which exists deep within our brain, is the third eye. It is a peculiar gland. The cortical brain is divided into two equal hemispheres within which most components exist in pairs. The singular pineal gland, however, is present between the two hemispheres. It is a little like an eye and is impacted by light; darkness activates it and light inhibits it. A hyperactive pineal gland is regenerative. This is probably what made your body such that the Somras did not only lengthen your life but also repaired your injuries. Furthermore, the pineal gland is not covered by the blood barrier system...

One's blood flows freely throughout the body. But there is a barrier when it approaches the brain. Perhaps this is so as to prevent germs and infections from affecting the brain, the seat of one's soul. However, the pineal gland, despite being lodged between the two hemispheres, is not covered by the blood barrier system. It is obvious why your third eye throbs when you are upset; this is the result of blood gushing through your hyperactive pineal gland.
(*The Oath of Vayuputras*, 112)

The language of mythology is refracted distinctly throughout the novel. Contemporary words and idioms have been incorporated to give it contemporariness. The language that seems very simple at the surface contains deep philosophical

meaning when given a deep thought. It succeeds to create a jargon that suits the taste of contemporary readers. Sometimes it becomes abusive and low in comparison to figurative language, but it supplements technique and style to give the novel a semblance of contemporaneity. Languages of philosophy, psychology, history and science are simplified to the language of the masses. The sophisticated language is filtered and manipulated, particular jargon is invented and employed that facilitate acceptance by the youth. Each character is given his or her language and characteristics. This is noticeable when we read the thoughts of Shiva. The thoughts are typed in italics, thus, can be easily recognized. The language of his thoughts is sometimes abusive e.g. ‘dammit’, ‘what the hell’, ‘Bastards’, ‘bloody hell’, ‘bullshit’ etc. Many Indian terms have been introduced along with their true meaning. ‘Namaste’, ‘Ayushyaman bhav’, ‘Akhand saubhagyavati bhav’, ‘Jai Shree Ram’, ‘Parmatma’, ‘Bhojan graham, etc. help to retain the mythological essence in the novel. One of the striking examples of refraction is the explanation of the slogan *Har Har Mahadev*.

‘A man becomes Mahadev when he fights for good. A Mahadev is not born as one from his mother’s womb. He is forged in the heat of battle, when he wages a war to destroy evil... I am Mahadev, but I am not the only one! ... I am not the only one! For I see a hundred thousand Mahadevs in front of me! I see a hundred thousand men willing to fight on the side of the good! I see a hundred thousand men willing to battle evil! I see a hundred thousand men capable of destroying evil! ... *Har ek hai Mahadev! Har Har Mahadev*’ bellowed Shiva. The Meluhans roared. *All of us are Mahadevs! (The Immortals of Meluha, 344-345)*

Gods and Goddesses are humanized and are portrayed exhibiting humanly manners. They have human desires, weaknesses, faults and strengths. There are no magical powers. There is no magical appearance or disappearance and so they are more acceptable and earthly. Most of the magic which is described in the Vedic texts or Sanskrit versions are given scientific justifications. They travel on foot or by ship. The novel is replete with these examples – Shiva’s habit of smoking weed, his dancing with Sati, his observation of Sati’s body etc. When Shiva and Sati are performing Rama Puja at Bal-Atibal kund where Guru Vishwamitra taught Lord Rama his legendary skills on the way to Kashi after the victory, Shiva, instead of closing his eyes to offer sincere prayer, looks at Sati with smile.

Sati frowned at her husband, gesturing with her eyes that he should concentrate on his prayers. Shiva, however, pursed his lips together and blew her a kiss. A startled Sati frowned even more. Her Suryavanshi sensibilities felt offended at such frivolous behaviour, which she considered a violation of the code. Shiva pouted like a spoilt child, closed his eyes and turned towards the fire. Sati turned too, eyes closed, allowing herself a slight smile at the fact that she had been blessed with an adoring husband. (*The Secrets of the Nagas*, 27)

The reunion of Sati and her deformed son Ganesha, for the first time, is one of the most emotional scenes in the trilogy. The Lord of the People – Ganesha and the fiercest warrior Sati – the son and the mother are overwhelmed to see each other and cry profusely.

‘And this sad soul,’ said Kali, pointing at the Lord of the People, ‘is the son you abandoned, Ganesh.’ Sati gasped in shock. ‘My son is alive?’ She stared at Ganesh. ‘My son!’ Angry tears were flooding down Ganesh’s face.

His body was shaking with misery. 'My son...', Sati's heart was crying in pain. 'But... but father said my son was stillborn.' She continued to stare. I was lied to. Sati held her breath. She stared at her twin sister. An exact replica of her. A visible proof of the relationship. She turned to Ganesh. 'My son is alive?' Ganesh looked up, tears still rolling down his eyes. 'My son is alive,' whispered Sati, tears spilling from her eyes. Sati stumbled towards the kneeling Ganesh. She went down on her knees, holding his face. 'My son is alive...' She cradled his head. 'I didn't know, my child. I swear. I didn't know.' Ganesh didn't raise his arms. 'My child,' whispered Sati, pulling Ganesh's head down, kissing his forehead, holding him tight. 'I'll never let you go. Never.' Ganesh's tears broke out in a stronger flood. He wrapped his arms around his mother and whispered that most magical of words. 'Maa...' Sati started crying again. 'My son. My son.' Ganesh cried like the sheltered little child he had always wanted to be. He was safe. Safe at last. Safe in his loving mother's arms. (*The Secret of the Nagas*, 237-238)

The example of the meeting of Parvateshwar and Anandmayi is equally interesting. Parvateshwar, the General of Meluhan army, despite being a great warrior and the greatest follower of Lord Ram and his principles of the empire, feels abashed and timid in front of Anandmayi. In comparison to Annandmayi's open and bold attitude, Parvateshwar is projected reserved and meek. When he goes to propose Anandmayi, the scene is quite romantic and amusing. He says,

'Your Highness?' Anandmayi spun around, surprised to find Parvateshwar there, looking sheepish. The Princess of Ayodhya was about to open her mouth, when he corrected himself. 'I meant Anandmayi,' whispered

Parvateshwar. Anandmayi stood up in surprise. ‘Yes, General? You wanted something?’ asked Anandmayi, her heart racing. ‘Ummm... Anandmayi... I was thinking... Well, it’s like this... It’s about what we were talking about...’ Anandmayi was aglow, smiling from deep within her heart. ‘Yes, General?’ ‘Ummm... I never thought I would face this day. So... Ummm...’ Anandmayi nodded, keeping quiet, letting him take his time. She could figure out exactly what Parvateshwar wanted to say. But she also knew that it would be very difficult for the Meluhan General. (*The Secret of the Nagas*, 253)

Parvateshwar tells his dilemma to Anandmayi about breaking free from the vows and Suryavanshi traditions he has been following for years. This attempt to woo is “one of the most wooden attempts at courtship in history” (*The Secret of the Nagas*, 254). But Anandmayi is wise enough to understand the gravity of the situation. She is unable to decide whether to frown or laugh; she remains silent and then

Anandmayi lunged forward and kissed Parvateshwar hard. A deep, passionate kiss. Parvateshwar stood stunned, his hands to his side, taking in a pleasure he hadn’t ever imagined. After what seemed like a lifetime, Anandmayi stepped back, her eyes a seductive half-stare. Parvateshwar staggered, his mouth half open. Not even sure how to react. ‘Lord Ram be merciful,’ the General whispered. Anandmayi stepped closer to Parvateshwar, running her hand across his face. ‘You have no idea what you have been missing.’ Parvateshwar just continued to stare at her, dumbfounded. Anandmayi held Parvateshwar’s hand and pulled him away. ‘Come with me.’ (*The Secret of the Nagas*, 254-255)

Considering the semiotic mechanism of refraction process, the concept of core-periphery can be helpful in the analysis. The core creates a self-description to define itself against the periphery and the margin by creating the 'other'. The core is rigid and cannot be changed. The core seems more structured and organised than the periphery.

The systematic arrangement of the city is a very good example of self-description created by the core. Meluha defines itself by excluding all these people who do not follow the Meluhan traditions. The city defines its identity against Vikarma law and other tribes whom Meluhans consider barbarians. The Meluhans describe themselves by differentiating 'our' customs, festivals, systems from 'theirs'; hence becomes the core. The core defines the caste system by using the language of the symbols like amulets, swastika, or AUM. The system of amulets is like Levi-strauss's totem and Lotman's boundary. It separates and it joins. They are both natural and cultural at the same time. The symbols people wear represent their ability and skills. Anyone who is not wearing these amulets are the others.

The Chandravanshis stay at periphery and continuously try to penetrate the boundary to invade the core. They have low standards only because they do not follow the Meluhan rules and codes. They have different system of economy and distribution. They are poor and less sophisticated than Meluhans. They do not force anyone to accept the codes provided by the system. They are the free people. They are poor but they have their choice of living. Their lives are not bound like Meluhans and they are still happy and satisfied in their own conditions. As Chandravanshis do not identify with Meluhans, they are barbaric, uncultured and uncivilised. Meluhans define themselves against the other – Chandravanshis.

Though they are non-isomorphic and unidentical to the core-center of Meluha, with all odds and differences, they too believe in the legend of the Neelkanth. When Shiva reaches the city, he sees their strong faith in Neelkanth which proves them to be isomorphic to Meluhans. They still share the faith; hence provide a good example of isomorphism at third level which can be understood by the example of the symbol 'AUM'. The symbol of 'Aum' which is translated in detail in the novel is significant. The upper curve of the Aum represents the Chandravanshis and the bottom half, the Suryavanshis. The amalgam of the two is the emergent common path. The crescent moon to the right of the symbol was pre-existing Chandravanshis symbol and the sun above is symbol for the pre-existing Suryavanshis. The Aum symbol created by Lord Bharat signifies the unity and harmony between both the tribes. There is another symbol Swastika that can be translated into "that which is associated with well-being or very simply a lucky charm" (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 282). Not only Aum and Swastika but there are also symbols like Trishul, Animals, Rivers, Nagas, Vikarmas etc. having their own symbolic significance.

Meluha represents the major trends of culture of ancient India and caste system, and thus becomes a symbol of India – its core. It tries to justify them by scientific explanations and reasons. The core creates self-description to define itself from others. When merged with the peripheral penetration, the information of Meluha and Chandravanshi people's way of life emerges in third level of semiosphere. The languages which are used in the process of refractions, though incompatible and non-identical, become identical and functional at the level of semiosphere including Suryavanshis and Chandravanshis. Finally it can be said that the novel is a text which represents the core and periphery and is isomorphic to India.

Shiva's character can be read as peripheral penetration into the core. Shiva's throat turned blue – Neelkanth – by taking Somras, sets the story into motion. All the Meluhans have strong faith in the legend of Neelkanth as he is believed to be their savior and the destroyer of the evil. Very few, like Parvateshvar and Brahaspati harbour a different opinion than the others. But gradually the faith, trust and respect for Shiva grows when they happen to know Shiva at close quarters. Shiva's true identity as Mahadev dawns upon them. Despite being an outsider from Tibet, Shiva gradually acquires the most important place in Meluha. He has all characteristics of the periphery – rebel, experimental, different from the core etc. He then challenges the core.

He disagrees with the idea of outcasting physically deformed, genetically mutated people from the society. He accepted Chandravanshis as different people with their different life style. Though their ways are completely opposite to Meluhans, they too have faith in Lord Rama and his established principles. They too have their faith in Lord Neelkanth and they are waiting for their savior to save them from the ill-treatment of Suryavanshis. Shiva criticizes and solves many Meluhan rules and codes by keeping humanity at the center. He brings some social reforms. Shiva denies to go for shuddhikaran – purification process. It is the law that if anyone touches the Vikarma – ill-fated – he or she needs to go for purification process. After he gets the recognition and wins the faith of Meluhans, Shiva succeeds to oppose the law of Vikarma by marrying Sati. He abolishes the law and declares the Vikarma law as scrap. Shiva expresses his own ideology about the Vikarma law and describes it as the very evil of an ideal society. Here he becomes the destroyer of the evil in the true sense.

The three volumes abound variety of instances of refractions. Be it the language, the description of characters or their behaviour, they are strikingly

contemporary. One can easily infer that the elements from old mythology are presented in contemporary forms which are untranslatable and non-isomorphic to each other. Every old ritual (the language of old mythology) is modified and given a new dimension in new semiotic system (language of modern day science and technology) which are unfunctionable and polar. If the trilogy is considered as the translation and counterpart of western fantasy and thrillers for young reader class, it becomes a new text generated from the untranslatability of two unjuxtapositionable polar thoughts. Here, there are two semiotic systems – language of myth and new language of science and technology unidentifying and incompatible with each other when they are read in the context of globalized India, they become functionable and isomorphic to the core texts at the third level when evolve in globalised Indian semiosphere.

***The Pregnant King* by Devdutt Pattanaik**

Devdutt Pattanaik in his first work of fiction, *The Pregnant King* (2008), retells the Yuvanashva tale from the *Mahabharata*. The *Mahabharata* is an ocean of characters that contains world's most extraordinary characters with extraordinary lives. This novel is a story of few among thousands who are accommodated in the great Indian epic. By using popular symbols and anecdotes to express nature of the characters, the text retells the story behind all symbols in contemporary context. Creating a complex network of these characters picked from the ancient epic, the novel discloses certain pertinent issues regarding gender in the contemporary context. Pattanaik's analytical approach deciphers the complex plot of Indian mythology. He contests the role of dharma in determining the fate of human lives by proving how dharma is moulded, manipulated, and even bent according to the situation and need of the time. How man-made rules are treated as final verdict of the society and how they

are exploited to mend the situation is beautifully represented with the retelling of the stories of these characters in a new way. By treating sex in objective manner to produce an heir, the text highlights certain social evils regarding sexuality and gender. As the novel is written with contemporary perspective, it counter attacks the long lasting tradition of mythology and the roles of women and men. Along with that, the author explores socio-political dimension of that time making it relevant to contemporary times.

The focus of the novel is that one must produce an heir to the throne to become king. There are kings like Pandu and Dhritrashtra, who were most unfit people to rule the kingdom as the former is impotent and the latter, blind. Similar is the case with the husband of Shilavati, Yuvanashva, Shikhandi and many others. The question of the conditions to become a suitable king, the ability to produce an heir to the kingdom and the transformation from woman into man and vice versa, raise many questions that must be answered in terms of social and cultural context.

The novel talks about the story of Yuvanshva recounted from the *Mahabharata*. According to the *Mahabharata*, Yuvanashva, king of Vallabhi, lived many generations before the Kurukshetra war. There is a shift in chronology and timeline by putting character and his story parallel to the ancient epic. The novel allows the text to raise certain issues in terms of identity, gender roles and role of Dharma. The author took liberty to change, modify and manipulate the scriptural plotline. Certain characters are invented and some are replaced in timeline. *The Pregnant King* (2008) situates them a contemporary of the Pandavas and Kauravas. Yuvanashva, taken from ancient mythology, has been made a contemporary of the Pandavas. Not only that he was put at a different time in the novel, he also had a different role to play in the history of the

war. He is the father, he is the mother, and he is the king. The predetermined role of the king and males is challenged and brought to the surface. He can be read as the contemporary model for the people who resist long established social gender roles.

Yuvanashva is portrayed as the king of Vallabhi, descendant of Turvasu. He is one of the few kings who doesn't participate in the war. The story of the novel begins with the gathering of all kings from kingdoms to fight the great war of Kurukshetra. Every king of the land joins the war but Yuvanashva is denied the consent by his mother Shilavati. Following his mother's desire to have an heir to rule after Yuvanashva, he decides not to go to war until he fathers a son.

Though Yuvanashva was the rightful heir of his father Prasenjit, he was denied his right to be the king. Although married to three queens, Simantini, Poulomi, and Keshini, he fails to give his kingdom an heir. When all ways failed, Yuvanashva requested two siddhas Yaja and Upajaya to perform a ritual to have a son. They created magic potion which can make his wives pregnant. In lot of confusion, Yuvanashva haply consumes the magical potion meant for his wives to get pregnant, ending into getting himself pregnant; hence the title. He came to know about it months later when his 'thigh' grew bigger. He has all symptoms of being pregnant.

The novel is refraction and can be read as the text-within-the-text, or myth-within-the-myth. The novel talks about gender issues where the rhetoric device of 'inverse image' becomes crucial and reiterates such problems in the society. Lotman states,

Of particular interest, from this point of view, are those cases where there is a change in the functions of the sexes, since a non-semiotic structure is deliberately absorbed into the space of the semiotic game and a level of

unpredictability is introduced into the system which is completely independent of the human will... Our attention will focus on the cultural role of secondary sexual functions: on those cases where the woman, in specific cultural contexts, assigns to herself the role of the man or vice versa; and to even more subtle situations, for example, where the woman plays the role of a woman in an accentuated manner. (*Culture and Explosion*, 86)

After the birth of his children – Mandhata (born from Yuvanashva) and Jayanta (born from his second wife, Pulomi), Yuvanashva experiences different feelings for each of them. For Mandhata he has more motherly feelings. He likes to feed Mandhata, nurse him, sings lullaby for him. The performance of his motherly instincts is done secretly because he is afraid of the society and never musters a courage to reveal it in public. He wants his children especially Mandhata to call him mother too. He falls into dilemma whether he is a man or a woman, a father or a mother. Society instructs him to remain a father, but a mother's heart keeps him close to his child. It is ironical that the man who is destined to be the king wants to be a mother from the bottom of his heart. His entire life transforms and he feels the crisis,

“I may look like a man but I am not sure that I am a man”, said Yuvanashva. “I have created life outside me as men do. But I have also created life inside me, as women do. What does that make me? Will a body such as mine fetter or free me?” (*The Pregnant King*, 331)

There is a change in the role of the king as a mother. It becomes a tale of emotions, happiness and feelings. Yuvanashva's dilemma about how his son addresses him as a mother or a father, gives novel another dimension. The novel questions the

societal reactions. If he reveals the secret about his son to the society, what the consequences would be.

The story of Yuvanshva is supported with many other stories of different characters. One or the other way, they share similar experiences of manhood and womanhood in their lifetime. There are characters whose stories are brought to light with special reference to their reversed gender roles. Shilavati, Somvat and Somvati, Shikhandi, and Krishna are the characters among whom the former is given the duty of a man by she becomes the king. The rest transform into their opposite gender.

The character of Shilavati is much more dynamic. Despite her intelligence, Shilavati is not suitable to become a king as she is not a man. Shilavati, the daughter of Ahuka – King of Avni, the mother of Yuvanashva became widow at the very young age. She is a proxy ruler in the absence of a true king.

Widow since the age of sixteen, Shilavati had been the regent of Vallabhi, and custodian of her son's kingdom for nearly thirty years. She sat in her audience chamber on a tiger-skin rug, dressed in undyed fabrics, no jewellery except for a necklace of gold coins and tiger claws, and a vertical line of sandal paste extending from the bridge of her nose across her forehead. She looked as imperious as ever. (02)

She is described as a woman with man's head. She overhears all the education given to Nabhaka, his brother and masters all shastras. Her father allows her to sit in the court and discusses issues with her. She is encouraged by her husband Prasenjit to use bow like a man. Shilavati has that royal aura in her. She is coronated soon after the death of Prasenjit as she was carrying Yuvanashva in her womb.

A royal widow must shave her head, renounce all jewellery and cosmetics and wear only undyed fabric. Without a husband, she has no reason to adorn her body. But Shilavati was not allowed to shave her head or renounce her jewellery or wear colourless clothes. Dressed in red and laden with gold, she was led by the Brahmanas to the throne. Milk was poured on her. Then honey. Then treacle. Then water. This was the raj-abhishekha that bestows on the king authority over the lives of other men. (36)

Shilavati is a regent, but proves to be a greater ruler than any other men in Vallabhi. As a ruler, she takes all the responsibility regarding varna-ashrama-dharma. She constantly observes and counseles with elders of all varnas. She organizes various festivals to attract visitors. Vallabhi flourishes economically. She makes arrangements for irrigation projects so that the farmers of her kingdom need not be dependent on rain water. She remains more submissive to other kings as she is well aware of the fact that Vallabhi could not afford its prince to wage the war. She maintains warm and cordial relation with neighboring kings paying a very handsome tribute once a year. When kshatriyas are not happy with the submissive policy of Shilavati and they complain, she convinces them with her diplomatic argument. She says,

Kingship is not about winning wars. It is about maintaining order. Order is dharma and dharma is Vishnu. Vishnu holds in his hands not only the conch-shell trumpet of war but also the lotus of diplomacy. Diplomacy has served us well. It may not have brought glory but it has brought stability. In Vallabhi, Vishnu does not ride the hawk of war; he reclines in peace on the serpent of time. At his feet, seated on the lotus of diplomacy, is Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune, blessing us all. (45)

The novel relates the incident of Somvat. Somvat gives away his masculinity and becomes a wife of Sumedha. It also recounts the story of Shikhandi who gives birth to a son with the help of Sthunkarna, the Yaksha.

Somvat and Sumedha, the two best friends, play role of a husband and wife to get a cow so that they can marry a woman. Somvat becomes a wife wearing a red sari and a yellow uttarya but “had hairy legs, no toe-rings and who ate even before her husband” (123). When Somvat is asked about his name, he replies that she is Somvati. He takes the female name. Then, everything turns upside down. The couple is caught and Somvat is humiliated in public. He is thrown in the dungeon for creating such mischief and spoiling the social conduct. In the dungeon, he meets the Yaksha named Sthunakarna. “I am Sthunakarna. A Yaksha. Maker of riddles. Guardian of treasures. Follower of Kubera. Resident of Alaka-puri. I can go wherever I please – through walls, into dreams. Rules of Manavas do not apply to me. It was I who made Shikhandi a man and a husband. I can make you a woman and a wife” (127).

He told Somvat his story of how he gave his genitals to Shikhandi.

The Yaksha continued, ‘On his wedding night, Shikhandi’s wife noticed that her husband’s body was no different from hers.’ ... ‘Shikhandi ran out of Panchala, suddenly confronted by the truth of his body. He tried to drown himself in the river. I saved him. Or should I say her? I asked him, “What do you think you are, a man or woman?” “I am not sure,” he said in a voice that was definitely not a man’s. “My father insists I am a man. So does my mother. But my body is just like my wife’s,” ...’ ... ‘I felt sorry for Shikhandi. I picked her up and put her on my lap and wiped her tears and comforted her. She was a girl. A little girl raised as a boy. Confused. Embarrassed by the princess of

Dasharni. Afraid of being the cause of Panchala's destruction.' The Yaksha paused. Somvat noticed that the Yaksha had compassionate eyes. 'I felt sorry for him. I told him that I would grant him my masculinity and take on his femininity. Then he could be a man with the courtesan sent by his father-in-law. After that he could be a man with his wife. And then with as many women as he wished. But only until the following new-moon night. On that day he would have to return my manhood to me. (129-130)

But Shikhandi never comes back to return Yaksha's manhood. He has been waiting for thirty years and makes an offer to Somvat that he can give him his (Sthunakarna's) femalehood, so Somvat can be wife of Sumedha and can be saved from the wrath of the society and the King Yuvanashva. Somvat accepts the offer by imagining him-(her)-self wife of Sumedha and being a woman. She then becomes Somvati. But they are burnt alive by Yuvanashva and become ghosts to torment Yuvanashva.

Shikhandi too goes through the transformation process after his marriage. Drupad visits the god/ goddess Illeshwar/ Illeshwara to bear a son that can kill Drona. A baby girl is born after this visit and when the girl is handed over to Drupad, he smiles and declares proudly, "This is the son that Shiva promised me, the son who will kill Drona and Bhishma. I name him, Shikhandi, the peacock" (18). Despite knowing the fact that the child is a female, everyone, fearing the wrath of Drupad, hailed the child as male. The role of Shikhandi was inverted from girl to boy, the killer of Drona and Bhishma.

Apart from these, the novel mentions the story of Arjun's transformation into eunuch. Though he is a greatest warrior of his time, he is castrated by nymph and hence

experiences a woman's world. The story of Arjuna being Brihanalla is recounted with different perspective. When Yudhishtir conducts Ashvamegh Yagna, the royal horse reaches Vallabhi and Yuvanashva with his friend Vipula do not let the horse pass. Yuvanashva and Vipula challenge Arjuna and ask the great warrior,

‘Is it true that you spent the thirteenth year of your exile disguised as a woman?’ asked Vipula. ‘It is true, is it not? You hid yourself in the dancing hall of Matsya and taught the princess to dance. My king wishes to know everything that happened there. Everything. Even that which you have not shared with your brothers, or your wife.’

‘Was it so terrible to be a woman?’ asked Yuvanashva. (242)

Arjun agrees to share his story so that he can unburden his soul that way. He recounts his story to Yuvanashva only. The story reveals Arjun's experience of being a woman in a man's body.

‘No. It is terrible to appear as a woman and still have a man's heart,’ Arjuna replied.

Arjuna spoke with a faraway look in his eyes, ‘To be a woman is like becoming a prey, her every move watched by hungry predators. Every glance of man is a violation. No one is spared. No one. Not mother, not sister, not daughter. It is only fear of dharma that keeps men in check.’

‘How can you say such things about men when you are one yourself?’ asked Yuvanashva.

‘You have to see a man’s eye through a woman’s body. Then you will see a different truth. A truth that few men are prepared to acknowledge. Take away dharma and man is a beast. Ready to pounce on any woman. Even a false woman such as me.’

‘A false woman?’

‘A woman without a womb. You see, I dressed as a woman, but I still had a man’s body. All except my manhood.’ (242-243)

The role of the deity inverted every fifteen days from mother to father and from god to goddess. Ileshwara is both a goddess on new-moon nights and a god on full-moon days. The god/ goddess Ileshvara transforms from male into female and vice versa every fortnight.

On new moon nights the deity in the temple is an enchantress displaying fourteen symbols of womanhood. Red sari, unbound hair, bangles, nose-rings, pots, parrots, sugarcane. As the moon starts to wax, each symbol of womanhood is replaced by a symbol of manhood, one each day. On the first day, the unbound hair is replaced by curled moustache. The next day the red sari gives way to a white dhoti. Then the pot is removed and a bow put in its place. Gradually, the parrot becomes the peacock, the sugarcane becomes the spear, turmeric becomes ash, so that full moon, when only men enter the temple, the deity is an ascetic displaying fourteen symbols of manhood. Ileshwara makes fathers. Ileshwari makes mothers. (15)

Even Krishna is not left in this process of transformation of men into women. He becomes the wife of Iravan for a night. These characters can be understood as

inverse images who exchange their dominant features. When Sahadev asks to offer human sacrifice to goddess Kali to win the war, there are three perfect men – Krishna, Arjun and Iravan. Pandavas cannot sacrifice Krishna as he is their guide, not even Arjuna as he is their best archer. So only Iravan is left for the sacrifice. He gets ready to give away his life with a condition of getting a wife who would cry after his death. No woman would be ready to be widow in a day so Krishna offers himself to become his wife.

Krishna then became a woman. A perfect woman. Mohini, the enchantress. She became Iravan's bride. She approached him bearing the sixteen love-charms of marriage. He put the sacred thread dipped in turmeric round her neck. He put vermilion powder in the parting of her hair. They took seven steps together around the sacred fire. Then they were taken to a tent. The bridal chamber on the battlefield. Through a tear in the tent, Iravan showed her the Arundhati star. She gave him betel nut and milk. They talked. She laughed. He felt loved. They spent all night in bliss. (252)

He cried like a widow after the death of her husband.

By providing these examples of inverse image, the novel challenges the fixated roles of males and females in the society. Through these mythological characters, the novel challenges the norms of sexuality and gender. By refracting the myth from the *Mahabharata*, the author deeply analyses and explores ancient myths with contemporary relevance. The line of difference between male and female is blurred and eventually removed in the novel.

All the stories in the novel and the novel itself are texts within a text, myths about a myth, isomorphic to the larger text functioning in the globalized Indian

semiosphere. All of them create their own semiotic space which is always interconnected with the larger space that produces them.

***Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* by Devdutt Pattanaik**

The novel is rewriting of the great Indian epic the *Mahabharata* and can be read as refraction. With clear and simple style, the novel meditates complex and disturbing human conditions that has evolved Indian thought from time to time. The book re-narrates the grand tale of the *Mahabharata* amalgamating the regional versions. The novel also provides certain variants of some of the stories as a part of explanations. Certain myths are told with their references and commentaries. They are criticisms, tribal versions of myths, commentaries, shades of the same myths and so on. The title of the book is changed and given mythological context which seems quite logical to make the novel more readable. The plot of the book is divided into 18 chapters which are similar to the *Mahabharata* in the epic form. The novel summarizes the saga in prose form containing every important episode.

The important feature of the book is its form. While translating the classical the *Mahabharata* into modern day acceptable tale, the writer has taken care of certain important aspects which are necessary to make the novel popular among the elite class. The book includes the line-drawings by the author himself to give it a colourful effect. It provides the cross-references at the end of every chapter make it more agreeable to the contemporary readers. It tries to summarise the epic while maintaining the original plot structure.

The plot of the *Jaya* is divided into tales and sub-tales, sometimes it summaries of Sanskrit version and sometimes it digresses from it. It has 18 chapters/books with prologue and epilogue. All 18 chapters though resemble 18 parvas in Sanskrit epic,

have different titles. Every chapter has smaller tales and an explanation at the end of the sub-chapter given in the box – which one (the researcher) may call an explanation box. The book is narrated by Vaishampayana to Janamejaya. The book begins with the story of Janamejaya's ancestors which proves that the history of violence and revenge is being repeated time and again. It ends with the end of the fire sacrifice, being performed by Janamejaya. New dharma is established and peace is restored.

The title of the text, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata* itself suggests that it abounds refractions. The author mentions in the notes that the epic was narrated by Vyasa without pause to ensure the tale remains unadulterated by human prejudice and was written by elephant god Ganesha. Vyasa calls this tale *Jaya* – the tale of victory. So instead of giving any other title to the book, Pattanaik adopts same title. The book contains the drawings by the author himself.

Apart from this, the back-cover page of the book presents the Great Epic in refracted form. It says,

The Mahabharata is an ancient Hindu epic where:

A son renounces sex so that his father can remarry

A daughter is a prize in an archery contest

A teacher demands half a kingdom as his tuition fees

A student is turned down because of his caste

A mother asks her sons to share a wife

A father curses his son-in-law to be old and impotent

A husband lets another man make his wife pregnant

A wife blindfolds herself to share her husband's blindness

A forest is destroyed for a new city

A family is divided over inheritance
A king gambles away his kingdom
A queen is forced to serve as maid
A man is stripped of his manhood for a year
A woman is publicly disrobed
A war is fought where all rules are broken
A shift in sexuality secures victory
The vanquished go to paradise
The victors lose their children
The earth is bathed in blood
God is cursed
Until wisdom prevails

From beginning to end, the novel proves to be a refraction. When Gandhari is pregnant, Pandu is depressed with the news. He is not only childless but would also lose his right to the crown. Kunti reveals the secret of the ancient times.

Kunti consoled her husband, ‘There was a time when women were free to go to any man they pleased. This alarmed the sage Shvetketu who saw his father, Uddalaka, unfazed by his mother’s association with other sages. Shvetketu then introduced the law of marriage so that women were bound to husbands, enabling all men to know who their fathers were. They could only have children by their husbands and if their husbands were unable to give them children, they could go to men chosen by their husbands. Children borne by the wife belonged to the husband whether he fathered them or not. So it is that the father of the planet Mercury is the planet Jupiter even though it was the moon

who conceived him in the womb of the stars. So it is that you are the son of Vichitravirya even though he never made your mother pregnant.’ (47)

This is how the law of marriage came into existence. The story starkly reveals the violation of the dharma and the convenience of the royal class. The author provides various explanations and criticisms to validate the myth.

Shvetaketu is believed to be the fountain-head of patriarchy. Before he introduced the law of marriage, women had full sexual freedom. In fact, a woman could go to any man and a man who refused her was deemed a eunuch. This freedom was allowed because childbirth was considered of prime importance to facilitate the re-entry of forefathers into the land of the living. Shvetaketu insisted on fidelity from women so that all children knew who their biological fathers were. If a man could not father children because he was impotent, sterile or dead, the woman was allowed to go to other men, with the permission of her husband or his family. (48)

Certain names are explained in the narration of the story. For example the name of Arjuna – Parth. The name of Parth has its own references which are skipped in other versions of the *Mahabharata*. Pandu instructs Kunti to invoke Yama and Varuna to have children from them. Then he asked to invoke Indra at her own wish.

By him she had a son called Arjuna. He would be the most skilled archer in the world, capable of using the bow with both his right and left hand. Since Kunti had invoked Indra of her own volition and not because her husband had told her to, the son of Indra, Arjuna, became her favourite child. Only he was referred by all as Partha, the son of Pritha. (47)

The names of the flags at the war time are like Levi-Strauss' totem. They are natural as well cultural at the same time. "Name of warrior and their Insignia: Yudhishtira – Crescent moon, Bhima – Lion, Arjuna – Monkey god Hanuman, Ashwatthama – Lion's tail with golden rays, Bhishma – Tree with stars, Drona – Pot, Karna – Elephant, Duryodhana – Snake..." (228) and so on.

The names of conchs have similar implication.

Every warrior on the battlefield has a conch-shell trumpet. The sound of the conch-shell indicated the strength and stamina of warriors, and served as a warning to their opponents. Yudhishtira's conch-shell was called Ananta-vijaya, Bhima's was called Poundrya, Nakula's was called Sughosh and Sahadeva's was called Mani-pushpak. (245)

There are many tales which are included by the author in the book. These tale finds no mention in the original Sanskrit epic or the epic chooses to be silent. Another example of refraction is the inclusion of the story of Iravan or Aravan which skips reference in the Sanskrit epic.

The writer narrates the story of the devastating war which continues for nine days. People were killed, smashed, slaughtered. The ground became wet with blood. The air stank with the smell of rotting flesh. At night, the battlefield was cleared for next day's war. Sometimes it dawned before the land was cleared leaving the corpses in the battlefield for another day. The horrible sight induced trepidation. Both the warring parties were strong, thus, making it difficult to decide about the victory. One day the battle seemed to be in the favour of the Pandavas and on the other day, it favoured the Kauravas. "As the days passed, it was clear that the two sides were equally

matched. Victory eluded either” (247). There was no sign that the war would end with either side.

Then, Krishna suggested way out. To win the battle, human sacrifice must be made to please Goddess Kali and she would reveal the way to win the war. The warrior with “thirty-two sacred marks on the body would be ideal” (247). There are only three men on the Pandava’s side – Arjuna, Krishna and a warrior called Iravan. Krishna and Arjuna could not be sacrificed that left them with only one choice – Iravan. Iravan was the son of Ulupi – the Naga princess whom Arjuna married long ago. Arjuna could not recollect Ulupi but still he hugged Iravan his son in the hour of need. He says to Iravan, “If you are truly my son, you should not have any hesitation in allowing yourself to be sacrificed to Kali” (248).

Iravan knew that dharma allows no denial by a son to his father, so he puts condition. He demands not to die a virgin and asks for a wife who would weep when he would die. To follow another mandate of dharma, all knew that the last wish of the sacrificial victim must be fulfilled. Pandavas are ready to give Iravan a wife but no woman is willing to be a wife of a man who would die at sunrise. When all attempts fail, Krishna comes to the rescue. He takes the female form known as Mohini, marries to Iravan, and spent the night with him. The next day when Iravan is beheaded, “Krishna wept for him as his widow. No widow had ever wept for a man as Krishna did for Iravan” (248).

The Sanskrit epic does not broach the above mentioned episode. The tale of Iravan as the sacrifice to win the war is taken from the oral traditions of north Tamil Nadu. Iravan is worshipped as Kuthandavar, a form of Shiva and his sacrifice is performed every year. He becomes the husband of all men who have womanly feelings.

These men are called Alis who often castrate themselves to live as women. They are identified as homosexual transvestites who separate themselves from mainstream society. The story of Gaya, the gandharva who spat on Krishna and the conflict between Arjuna and Krishna, the tale of Barbareek, the story of Savitri and Satyavan, the folktale of why dogs copulate in public and many others are included in the book to give it a different shade.

A parallel can be drawn between the chapter titled 'Draupadi Admits a Secret' and Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions*. She reveals her secret love for Karna. One day when Pandavas and Draupadi are passing their days in forest, Draupadi comes across Jambu tree. The tree has a fine-looking fruit hanging there for twelve years which is promised to the Rishi performing penance for the last twelve years as his meal. She plucks it and the tree reveals that it is meant for the Rishi. She can fix the fruit back to its place if she is really chaste and pure.

The tree boomed, 'If you were truly chaste, Draupadi, you could have done it with the power of your chastity.'

'But I am chaste. Although I have five husbands, I am always faithful to the one brother who is allowed to come to my bed for a year.'

'You lie, Draupadi. There is someone that you love more.'

'I love Krishna, but as a friend, not as a husband or a lover,' said Draupadi, embarrassed by this public discussion of her most intimate thoughts.

'There is someone else you love. Someone else. Tell the truth, Draupadi.'

Draupadi broke down. She did not want her secret to be the cause of a Rishi going hungry. She revealed the truth, 'I love Karna. I regret not marrying him on account of his caste. If I had married him, I would not have been gambled away. I would not have been publicly humiliated. I would not have been called a whore.' (183-184)

The revelation of Draupadi's secret love for Karna shocks Pandavas and cleanses her at the same time.

***Vengeance of Ravana* by Ashok Banker**

Ashok Banker's *Vengeance of Ravana* (2012) is a good example of refraction. Yet again the old mythology is translated into the modern day language of science and technology. The novel is seventh book of *Ramayana Series* by the author. The novel recounts Rama's return to Ayodhya, Rishi Valmiki and his role, story of Atikay and Mandodhari, role of Bharata and Shatrugna, revelation of Rama as the incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the story of the *Ramayana* why it happened and what will happen in future, what and why Ravana did, and Sita's story as the daughter of Ravana. The novel has a complex plot like western fantasy thrillers and there is an excessive use of various mixed up plots to confuse the reader. The novel includes characters like Lord Mahadev Shiva, Yama, Valmiki, Atikay, Ravana etc.

The narrative structure of the novel is not very straightforward like Uttarkand. The novel begins with the chapter called 'Samaptam' followed by 'Prarambha'.

The story is set in between the return of Rama to Ayodhya after defeating Ravana and before Sita is exiled. The novel begins with Rama's return to his homeland Ayodhya from the forest to live in peace with his beloved wife Sita after the war with

Ravana. It depicts Rama-rajya and peaceful life in Ayodhya. Before the main action of the novel begins, there is a description of after war situation. Rama is observing the crowd before him who is chanting “*Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram, patit pavan Sita Ram, Sita Ram, Sita Ram, bhaj pyare tu Sita Ram*” (07) in his praise. The song is translated by the author himself, “Hail to thee, Rama, Lord of the House of Raghu, Saviour of the fallen, Hail to the divine union of Sita and Rama, Beloved are you both, Sita and Rama” (07).

Rama has a dream of meeting Ravana. He hears the familiar voice, he cannot see him in persona but he knows the voice very well. It hails the return of Ravana. The story follows the arrival of Atikay, one of the sons of Ravana for the revenge of his father’s death. He is accompanied by Mandodhari. Mandodhari addressed as rakshasi in the novel has brief conversation about her arrival in Ayodhya. There is a revelation that Sita is the daughter of Ravana. She says to Rama,

...the woman, that you call *your* wife, and whom you repeatedly claim was “abducted” against her will by my late husband... this woman is the only genuine heir of Ayodhya’s throne and the future leader of its destiny. As such, it behoves the people of Ayodhya to know her true identity and the reason why she has been the crucial element in all the events of the preceding years. The bone of contention, you might say. And that reason is simple enough... Sita Janaki of Mithila is the daughter of my late husband Ravana Putsalya and the bearer of our unborn grandchildren. And I am here to claim the throne of Ayodhya as ours by right. (180)

The novel has few examples that correspond to the movie *The Matrix* (1999), or to the Shakespearean song ‘The Seven Ages of Man’ or to the science of spirituality –

that the whole material world is Maya. It mentions different levels and versions of the world. When Sita is in verbal war with Atikay, she insists that it is the time for Ravana. He must die. Atikay reveals,

This is where you are mistaken, queen of Kosala... the lack of accepting the truth... For all this, this mad game of kings, is but a small part of the greater dance being performed at the end of days. And we are but bit actors in a lavish production. The real drama is elsewhere. Offworld. The real war is being waged in other realms, other times, other universes... Rama is not Rama, Ayodhya is not Ayodhya. This world is not what it seems. Nothing is as it appears. And we are pathetic unfortunate beings banished out of our true time and place and the worse for it. (222)

Some minor examples of refractions makes the story more interesting. To differentiate a deva from asura, one has to observe their eyes. The eyes a deva never blink. This seems very similar to the description of a vampire from the series '*The Twilight Saga*' in which the vampires live long and never sleep or blink their eyes.

The novel introduces the parallel universes and time-space-matter. It uses the time-space travel through Vortals. Even the title of the novel has various dimensions. The word vengeance has different implications. The main motif of the novel is to prove that evil cannot be eliminated completely from the world and it will return in the form of Ravana whenever it gets chance. "But now that Ravana is gone, Adharma has no single form to embody. Yet due to the casual nature of Balance, the eternal scale of Dharma and Adharma, Adharma is as essential for Preservation as Dharma itself. For without Adharma there can be no Dharma, and vice versa" (270). Adharma will always prevail in many forms.

The novel hits out that this establishment of Dharma will not last long and there will be wars in future, bloodier than the previous ones and that would be his true vengeance. Vishnu has to take birth again and again. And whenever there is chance for Vishnu, Ravana will return for his vengeance. With lot of twist and turns, the story is given a completely new dimension. It unconsciously glorifies Ravana and criticizes Maryada Purshottam – Rama.

***Bali and the Ocean of Milk* by Nilanjan Choudhury**

The language of the novel is quite contemporary in the context of the language of social media and internet technology. The whole novel can be read as refraction as well as ideology. But the first part can provide the examples of refraction and the second, ideology. In his preface, the author mentions about the source of the novel. In the year 1999, at the border area of Arunachal Pradesh was discovered an archaeological site that has radically altered our conception of oriental civilization as we know it. The research has revealed that this remarkable civilization was established by an extinct race, the Hurrians, whose origins have been traced to the banks of the Euphrates River in northern Mesopotamia. The artifacts that resembled ancient Greek in many ways, made many intriguing discoveries possible. The script when deciphered, revealed the story of the conflict between the Hurrian gods and their sworn enemies, a tribe of demons called Ahuras. The Ahuras are led by the great warrior king Bah Lee and his queen, the fiery Ava Nee. Arrayed against them are the gods with the ever resourceful King Ind Rah at the helm and the Holy Trinity of Sam Bah, the Creator, Vee Lu, the preserver and Jeh the destroyer, helping him along. This work has been translated into English and certain indianised version of names and places took form of this novel. The untold tale of Hurrian gods – the Holy Trinity of Sambha, Jai and

Viru, their protégé Indrah and how they churn out the ocean of milk together with the help of their mortal enemy, the asura king Bali is narrated with the contemporary taste and flavor of magic, science, politics and humour.

The novel is refraction because it tells a complete different story of two rulers – Indra and Bali – and the Holy Trinity. The novel is read as the modern day translation of old myth of churning of the ocean and acquisition of Amrit into day-to-day language of the people. The construction of the language is the core part of the analysis. It follows the old plot of deva and asura conflict to become immortal but with turns and twists, it gets an interesting read like western thriller. The novel is full of thrills and suspense. Every now and then the story takes a different turn and keeps reader spell bound. The gods are portrayed with the streak of humanness and the asuras are described in a little softer tone. It is not completely anti-deva novel. With its ups and downs, both devas and asuras become puppets in the hands of certain new enemies like Bhrigu and Suketu.

The beginning of the novel blows the trumpet of a new and different perspective on the old myth of churning of the ocean. The story begins at the time when devas are not immortal as the title of the novel suggests. Deva king Indrah faces old age and is losing his strength in every way. He is losing his hair, cannot lift his Vajra and cannot make love to his beloved Urvashi.

To remedy Indrah's aging and weakness, fragility, Nectar is necessary. It can only be achieved through the help of asuras. Lord Brahma, here Samba has hidden it in the Ocean of the Milk and it can be acquired with the harmonious try among Devas and Asuras. Viru, Lord Vishnu suggests that Indrah must seek the help of the king Bali for the churning. To make the effort, king Bali must recover from the snake attack deployed by Indrah. Bali is in his death-bed and must be treated accurately to get help.

The language that used to narrate the treatment is scientific and of medical science. When Indrah comes with the proposal of churning of the ocean of milk, he introduces himself as “Your majesty, my name is Niradh. I came here after hearing of the snake attack in King Bali. You see, I am a toxicologist by profession. A specialist in poison” (93). Toxicology is a branch of pharmacy. The term toxicologist is the person who deals with the treatment of poison.

Indrah is accompanied by Ashvani Kumars. They are disguised as Amalsen and Bimalsen. They criticize the method of treatment given to Bali by Bhrigu calling it primitive and old. The qualifications of Ashvani Kumars are quite interesting. When they are asked about their knowledge about medical science,

The twins stopped prancing and faced the sage. One of them extracted a scroll from his bag and unfurled it with a quick flick of his wrist. The parchment rolled out on the floor, almost two hands long from end to end.

‘Our degrees’, said one of the twins, indicating the rows of elegant handwriting that filled the document, ‘I Amalsen, Healer, Platinum class. Specialization Bhuta Vidya, super specialization Rasayanam.’

‘Myself Bimalsen, Healer, Gold Class, upgrade due’, said the other with a bow. ‘Specialisation Shalya Chikitsa, super specialization Kaaya Chikitsa.’ (96)

They mention long list of their teachers and supervisors. Then they narrate Bali’s treatment in the modern day language of biological science. They also mention their progress in various treatments and surgeries like, blood transfusion, hair transplant and other organ transplants like eyes, kidney, liver etc. Bhrigu is not convinced by their

theories and talk. The description of Bhrigu – the chief scientist of Tripura reflects modern flavor.

[Bhrigu] was squat and plump, even by asuran standards, but his movements were quick and bird-like. He looked like a giant gnarled potato, hopping about on a pair of spindly twigs. A fierce, white beard sprinkled with rills of black flowed over his chest, creating the impression of a hairy head that had suddenly sprouted out of his shoulders without the benefit of a neck. The plain white turban perched upon his bald head contrasted oddly with the riotously coloured gown that covered his copious belly and extended down his knees. (57)

The complete episode is narrated with light humour which can be acceptable and enjoyable to readers of contemporary India.

The novel includes scientific theories such as Big Bang. It is mentioned that with nectar, halahal – poison also would be released and that can destroyed the whole universe. The example of two opposites are necessary for creation of anything. Viru explains the theory of two opposites.

Samba constructed the entire universe out of two equal and opposite elements – nectar and poison – amrit and halahal...Every object in the universe comprises of some combination of these opposing elements: birds and bees, snowflakes and sand grains, cabbages and kings, people have different names for them, yin and yang, purusha and prakriti, matter and anti-matter, canonical variables and what have you, but the underlying principle of duality is the same. (81)

‘Sambha tells me that a short but immensely powerful burst of energy has to be released into the Ocean of Milk. I believe that’s how he combined the amrit and halahal to create the universe in the first place. He names it the Big Bang, for the lack of a better term’, Viru Chuckled. (83)

The whole novel is written in the language of contemporary day-to-day life. It depicts the love affair between Indrah and the Apsara Urvashi in light, humourous way. She calls him Indy and Indrah calls her Urvi. The words like darling, my love, TLC (taking loving care), ta-ta, see you later, making a wish by blowing an eyelash etc. gives the story modern touch.

Indrah is suffering from some illness. He cannot make love to Urvashi and so she is very angry with him. She says,

Do you realize that we haven’t made love one single time since that night [the night Indrah killed Vritra]? Do you? It’s been two hundred years for heaven’s sake and it’s driving me up the wall. Come on, Indy darling. What’s *wrong* with you? (02)

Not only that Indrah is suffering impotency, he looks like and feels more like an aged man who seems to lose his hair and has a bald scalp. The healers are unable to detect the problem. Apparently Indrah seems to be very healthy. He tries many things to improve his health and look. The ways of remaining young or to stop aging are quite humorous.

He gave up red meat and took to green vegetables, went for long morning walks and took cold showers three times a day. Every night, when Urvashi was asleep, he would tiptoe over to her dressing table and furtively

apply liberal gobs of pinkish cream called ‘My Fair Lady’ on his cheeks hoping that she wouldn’t notice is rapidly diminishing. (03)

He went to Ananda resort in the Himalayas to take a break. There he received great food and ayurvedic massage. He felt little better but that did not last long. He confesses,

I began having acid attacks if I drank too much soma, started becoming flabby around the hips, couldn’t sleep well. All sorts of niggling problems. A few months later, Urvashi pointed out few white hairs on the back of my head. That set me thinking. I hadn’t seen a god with white hair before – ever... I worried about it for a day or two and shrugged it off. Happens to the best of us, I said to myself. So I just painted my hair black with some dye that Urvashi had recommended, Molten Midnight by So’Real. (32)

Indrah, in the novel, is not only the ruler of the kingdom of Amravati, he is also a manager working under the Holy Trinity. He has to manage the income accounts. He has to maintain the kingdom from the funds he receives from the upper level like a grant from the government. Vasanti Devi is the Head of the Treasury. When Indrah complains to Viru about the shortage of funds, he is presented the Statements of Expenditure and Income prepared by Vasanti Devi. The statements are quite humorous but very relevant to the contemporary period.

AMRAVATI
STATEMENT ACCOUNTS
FOR THE ERA 10,211 TO 10,212: SATYA YUGA

Statement of Expenditure (in '000s of Swarna Mudras)			
No.	Item	Present Era	Previous Era
1.	Defense of the Realm	103,742	512,289
2.	Maintenance and Development of Amravati	57	231,124
3.	Staff Welfare		
3a	Education and Training	325	121,678
3b	Cultural Programmes	445,219	101,910
3c	Eggs of Hydasopian Firebird: 10 Pieces	500,000	NIL
3d	Whiskers of Infant Yalli: 25 Bundles	200,000	NIL
3e	Moondust: 100 Grains	600,000	NIL
4.	Total Expenditure	1,849,403	967,001

(13)

Statement of Income (in '000s of Swarna Mudras)

No.	Item	Present Era	Previous Era
1.	Voluntary Offerings to the Gods (BY Regions)		
1a	Kishkindha	2,700	500,024
1b	Magadha	100,000	500,000
1c	Vindhyachal	204	200.003
1d	Arunachal	501	200,020
2.	Wealth Obtained from Conquests (Asuras, Danavas, Gandharvas, etc.)	NIL	900,300
3.	Sale of Assets	800,000	NIL
4.	Total Income	903,405	2,300,347

(14)

The character of Shiva – here addressed as Jai is one of the most eye-catching character in the novel. When devas and asuras approached him on the day of churning the Ocean of the Milk, he was in his cave. A moth-eaten tiger skin lays at the entrance of the cave.

Upon it sat an ascetic smeared with ash. He was tall and thin, size zero as Urvashi would say, ribs protruding, long stick-like legs crossed over each other in the Lotus posture. Apart from a loincloth of speckled deer skin, his body was bare. A small half moon twinkled out of the forest of matted hair that covered his head. His eyes were closed and a beautiful smile graced his lips. (141)

He has just finished the last chillum and is relishing that bliss. He calls his wife Parvati – Paro and addresses King Bali as ‘Baloo’. When called out by asuras for the blessing, he blinks his eyes ten times as advised by his ‘suffering wife Paro’.

He felt a little annoyed. What did they think he was? A professional blesser? For centuries, he had been doing out boons to assorted asuras like these ones, much to the annoyance of his fellow gods. And they still wanted much more. His reputation for being the nice guy, the absent-minded do-gooder was all very well, but there was a limit to everything. When would these fellows learn? Didn’t they know he had stopped giving boons, those days were over – finished, finis, fi-ni-to. (141-142)

When Bali insisted Lord Jai to bless them and help them accomplish the task with fair means. Lord Jai replied, “Aah Baloo, you’re beginning to embarrass me now. After all, I am but one among three hundred and thirty-three million other gods. I too have my limitations” (144). He promised Bali to help him.

Devas are using a type of communication system more likely to Harry Potter’s Owl Postal Service. Here they use conch that appears from nowhere and delivers a message. It also mentions the modern detective codes like ‘Operation End Game’,

Operation Balika Vadhu successful', etc. These minor examples add a shade in the novel being a refraction.

***The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee**

The novel is a refraction and can be read as 'myth about myth' - 'text within a text' problematizing the smooth looking world of men into world full of complexities. The text, 'isomorphic' to its core-texts already demystified, reveals the reality of the society in the political unconscious. "Text-within-the-text exposes two texts, one is created by the author and second is created by the characters. The whole text passes through recoding and modification" (*Culture and Explosion*, 77). The smaller text-within-the-large-text creates its own world in itself. The novel is myth-within-the-myth. It provides voices to some silent characters. The ice is broken and the problems are revealed. The image of the outer world reality can be recognized with some codifications. The external reality of the text models out the internal reality of the characters. The novel is both, myth and reality, the tale narrated by Draupadi – one of the characters from the *Mahabharata*, and it is rewritten text from female perspective. The whole story of the *Mahabharata* is decoded and recoded by a character from the original story to provide another perspective of the larger text.

Draupadi's world is completely unpredictable. Yet, it reflects the stark realities of modern society. Her attraction towards Karna is not only revolutionary but also somewhat against male ideology. She is continuously thinking of him throughout the novel. How does he look, she tries and longs for reading his heart, she is quite eager to know his story, she observes how he fared in the battlefield, in guessing what might he has done when she was being gambled away etc. There are streams of instances like

the union of Draupadi and Karna at the end of the novel after their death and the lies told by Yudhishtir etc. help to understand the thought process of Draupadi.

Krishna touches my hand. If you can call it a hand, these pinpricks of light that are newly coalescing into the shape of fingers and palm. At his touch something breaks, a chain that was tied to the woman-shape crumpled on the snow below. I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable—but I always was so, only I never knew it! I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali. I reach with my other hand for Karna—how surprisingly solid his clasp! Above us our palace waits, the only one I've ever needed. Its walls are space, its floor is sky, its center everywhere. We rise; the shapes cluster around us in welcome, dissolving and forming and dissolving again like fireflies in a summer evening.

(394)

The rebel in Draupadi continuously efforts itself and comes to the fore just as reality tries to come to the surface from latent. When Draupadi is warned to repress her desire for Karna by Dharmaraja, she says,

But my disobedient heart kept going back to Karna, to that most unfortunate moment in his life. We'd both been victims of parental rejection—was that why his story resonated so?—but my suffering couldn't compare to his. Over and over I imagined the mother who had abandoned him—for I was sure that it was she and not the gods that had set him afloat on the river. Against my closed eyelids, I saw her as she bent to the water to cast the child—her own sweet, sleeping flesh—into its night currents. In my imagination, she was very young, and the curve of her turned-away face was a little like Gandhari's,

though that was a silly thing to think. She didn't weep. She had no tears left. Only fear for her reputation, which made her draw her shawl more closely over her head as she watched the casket. Just for a moment; then she'd have to hurry back. She'd left all her jewelry in her bedchamber, had clothed herself in her oldest sari. Still, it would be a disaster if the city watchman discovered her so far from her parents' mansion at a time when only prostitutes are abroad. She choked down a cry as the bobbing casket disappeared around a bend in the river. Then she walked home, her steps only a little unsteady, thinking, At least it's done. (78-79)

Another example of Draupadi's rebel is when she is summoned in the court after Yudhisthir gambled her away in the game. She straight away denies the order of Duryodhan.

My mouth went dry. Denials collided with each other inside me.

I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl.

But then I remembered what I'd read long ago in a book, never imagining that quaint law could ever have any power over me.

The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave.

"What did my other husbands say?" I whispered to the servant.

"They could say nothing," he answered unhappily. "They were already Duryodhan's slaves."

My head reeled, but I steadied myself. I tried to remember other words from the Nyaya Shastra. *If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife.* (190)

The text portrays Draupadi in a completely different light. It can be considered as an experiment happening at the periphery of the core. By giving the character a different dimension, the author generates new text and meaning. The story of all the characters go under the process of recodification. They become refractions. But time and again, she is reminded that she is living in a male centered patriarchal world, where women are nothing but just a bag of coins to be gambled away.

The episode of Draupadi's laughter and her comment on Duryodhan as the blind man's son is also blind, is considered by many the root cause of her humiliation in the court. But the novel gives another possible view of the incident. It is an important example of refraction in the novel. It was not Draupadi who made the comment on Duryodhan when he fell into the pool. The episode in the novel is narrated in the following lines.

Draupadi was in her balcony looking at the gardens she has designed by herself with the little changes made by Maya. To get the visitors, they have to get through the bridges. There are many, but only one is real and others are illusions, made of light and air and trickery, and they had caused many a visitor to end up with a drenching. Duryodhan when observing the palace, made his way to pool did not notice Draupadi and her attendants. Because of the latticework done by Maya, they cannot see who is there in the balcony. Duryodhan was dressed in fine clothes. Karna was accompanying him. Draupadi as usual got lost looking at Karna.

I was so preoccupied with Karna that I failed to notice what Duryodhan was doing until I heard the splash. He must have stepped onto an illusory bridge, for now he was floundering about in the pool. I stared, horrified, as he flailed and cursed, calling to his flustered courtiers who milled around, unwilling to jump in and ruin their own expensive clothes. My attendants burst into peals of laughter. I should have stopped them, but I couldn't help smiling myself, he looked so comical. Or was it that a part of me felt vindicated because my palace had done what I could not: brought low—if only for a moment—the man who I knew still hated my husbands, no matter what he pretended. Encouraged by my smile, one of the younger women cried out in her gay, clear voice, 'It seems the blind king's son is also blind!' (173)

Draupadi scolded her sharply, but the harm was done.

All eyes turned to the balcony. Duryodhan glared at the latticework. I could see what he thought: I'd deliberately chosen not to warn him and then insulted him in the worst of ways, by bringing up his father's infirmity. Karna, who had stepped into the pool to help his friend, stared up, too—giving me, finally, ironically, the attention... (173)

The novel beautifully provides the example of refraction by giving the shield of latticework.

***Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* by Anand Neelakantan**

The novel is refraction in many ways. Both deva and asura people are portrayed as two distinct civilizations in the novel. The novel tells the other side of the story of the *Ramayana* – the story of Ravana. Anand Neelakantan, in one of his interviews

mentioned that mythological villains are more believable and humane than heroes. They seem refreshingly contemporary in their values and ambitions. Their flaws make them more likable to humans. The novel does not aim to defame the *Ramayana* or to glorify Ravana. It is more subversive. It is an endeavour to bring out the latent reading of higher caste Brahminist Ramayana interpretations. It questions and contests the norms and customs of the society and makes reader realize that evil can have many shades and shapes. There is a need to look at the same issues from another side to re-interpret the long accepted mythological ideas about the goodness of Devas, and the evil of Asuras. The victory or defeat becomes meaningless at the end of the novel as people like Bhadra and their situations won't change much. Finally, the novel reveals how the loser's tale can be manipulated to glorify that of the Devas'.

The novel begins with the chapter titled 'The End'. The war is over and Ravana is on his death-bed. The proclamation of demystifying the Rama myth is hailed. The history of asura people is removed and the deva tradition which was modified and manipulated for centuries would be revealed in further pages. The novel does not lament the lost war, but it does examine and evaluate the long famed traditions of deva people and their ways.

Ravana proclaims,

For thousands of years, I have been vilified and my death is celebrated year after year in every corner of India. Why? Was it because I challenge the Gods for the sake of my daughter? Was it because I freed a race from the yoke of caste-based rule? You have heard the victor's tale, the *Ramayana*. Now hear the Ravanayana, for I am Ravana, the Asura, and my story is the tale of the vanquished. (Vijaykumar Patil, *The Hindu*)

The novel is not anti-Ramayana, but it is a kind of post-Ramayana. Bhadra, a common asura, who has a very important role to play at many instances, tells the story of poor men and women in the golden empire of Lanka. At one point, when Ravana wants to build the perfect world for his people, Bhadra's voice exposes the lacks and gaps in the utopian vision. Like the third eye in the novel, he observes the situations, receives information, enjoys and relishes victories, laments the losses, and lives like common man in any country. He exposes the casteism, the privilege of upper caste and rich people, the materialistic nature of the kingdom, the rise of corruption, the favourism and many other social and cultural evils of his times. This can easily be interpreted as a commentary on the present-day scenario.

When asked about Bhadra in an interview, Neelkantan says,

Bhadra was for creating a balance in the story, to give a third angle, the view from the bottom of the heap. Else, Asura would have just needed a self-justification of tirade of Ravana. Bhadra is the common man whose life never changes irrespective of whether Rama rules or Ravana. He is skeptic, selfish, amoral, and oppressed, he keeps his intellect intact and supports the establishment because it suits him. (Neelakantan interviewed by Devika S, The Hindu)

In the words of Bhadra,

I am non-entity – invisible, powerless and negligible. No epics will ever be written about me. I have suffered both Ravana and Rama – the hero and the villain or the villain or the hero. When the stories of great men are told, my voice may be too feeble to be heard. Yet, spare me a moment and hear my story,

for I am Bhadra, the Asura, and my life is the tale of the loser. (Vijaykumar Patil, *The Hindu*)

The novel recounts many examples that can be considered as refraction. Asura Empire boasts of extra-ordinary architecture and technology, built in collaboration with Mayan.

We had at that time, in collaboration with the architect and engineering guild of the Mayans, achieved great progress in technology. We had even developed a flying machine – the Pushpaka. (The famed flying machine made by the old Mayan) However, only a prototype had been built. (33)

The comparison between Asura and Deva system is given in refracted form. Deva system lacks competition and is completely based on caste hierarchy. They follow caste system in a rigid way. Particular tasks are assigned to people of particular caste.

Rama's cities like Ayodhya or Mithila, were different. These cities were an agglomeration of self-contained caste villages that interacted with each other for their minimum needs. Unlike the dynamic and brutally competitive, materialistic, yet magnificent cities of the Asuras, the cities of Rama presented a picture of a closed and static world, with the caste system forming its foundation. It put each one firmly in their place, depending on the accident of birth. In this system, dreams had no chance and aspirations were dangerous. (472)

Ravana's empire is described as total contrast to Devas'. They are unlike Ravana's cities like Trikota, Muzuris, Gokarna, or Mahabalipuram. They are the places,

where different cultures and races mingled; where people dared to dream about making it big; where trade, science, art and architecture flourished; where urbanity, planning, design and aesthetics all had their place; where fiercely competitive men and women fought in different spheres of life to create a mark in the world; where men of immeasurable talent and scientists like Mayan flourished. (472)

The most striking example of refraction is the story of Sita. The myth of the abduction of Sita and his will to marry her is presented by the rationale of another myth of Sita as the daughter of Ravana. King Janak's finding of Sita buried in the land is a popular myth. Neelkantan depicts less popular or lesser known myth of Sita being the daughter of Ravana. Sita, a princess of Lanka, is prophesized as the cause of destruction of Lanka. She must be killed to save Lanka. Ravana is afraid of her being killed or poisoned, so he takes her with him while attacking and invading Deva kingdoms.

When Bhadra is assigned the task of killing the Princess, he does not have the courage to do so. He waits as he cannot return and slept. The baby, Asura Princess slips off from his hands and fell into a ditch in the forest. The hunting party crossing by, hears the cry of the baby and she is picked up by Janaka, the king of Mithila with the help of a plough. Janaka names her Sita – the one got with a plough. Sita is treated as the princess throughout the novel.

When Ravana come to know about his lost daughter, he decides to free her. Ravana abducts her not to marry her but to free her from the bondages of Deva

tradition. In Asura tradition, she has not to spend her whole life following the footsteps of her husband, she has not to leave all her palatial comforts and go to forest. She can remarry the person she loves and can start her life anew.

The myth of Sita is linked with the myth of Vedavathi. During his invading mission, Ravana comes into contact with a beautiful Brahmin girl – Vedavathi. He is so much enchanted with her beauty, he forgets his mission of building an empire, and he forgets his daughter too. He falls in love with Vedavathi. One day, she challenges him in swimming. To impress her, Ravana enters into swiftly flowing the river Narmada and gets drowned. When he opens his eyes, he finds himself prisoner of King Karthiveerarjuna in his dungeon. They compromise and he is released after much of his won kingdom is given to King Karthiveerarjuna.

Ravana is ransomed heavily and he loses his all respect and valour after he returns to his people. The council has decided to dispose of the daughter as she is considered the cause of this loss. The princess and Vedavathi are to be thrown to die and the task is given to Bhadra. When Bhadra is carrying both of them into the forest to get rid of them, accidentally Vedavathi accidentally catches fire and dies. She curses Ravana,

She screamed and screamed, but continued burning. She had fallen a few feet from the bank and was beyond any help... Lying there near the river, a mass of half-burnt flesh, she looked ghastly. She kept cursing the entire Asura clan. She screamed that Ravana had brought her to this and that she would return in the next life to haunt him... Before she died, she howled that she would enter the body of the little Asura princess as a spirit and ensure that the entire

Asura clan was destroyed, and the prediction of that astrologer would come true through her wrath, through her chastity. (225)

When Ravana comes to know about the death of Vedavathi and the adoption of Sita by King Janaka, the memory of Vedavathi keeps haunting in his dream. He is reminded of his act again and again.

The episodes of Dhobi's comment on the character of Sita and Rama's killing of Shambuka are much debated in the history of the *Ramayana*. The novel too mentions the episodes but with some twist. After Rama's invasion over Lanka, life for Asuras turns worse. People start fleeing from the place by bribing officials. Bhadra and his wife too arrange to shift for a better place. During the arrangement, he meets a couple – Arsi and Shiva. Somehow, they come to Ayodhya and are accommodated in the Dhobi colony. The colony is a symbol of both – the caste discrimination in Ayodhya and the symbol of equality.

The Dhobi colony was by the river and stretched far to the north. The merchant showed us the colony and vanished before we could even thank him. The colony was a city unto itself. There were people belonging to all races – Asuras, Nagas, Kinnaras, Gandharvas, coal black barbarians, yellow skinned Chinese, yellow haired barbarian races from some cold countries, and people of mixed race. But they all belonged to one caste, Dhobi. Here, in the north, the caste system was ancient and entrenched. One belonged to the lowest caste of one's parents, though one may not have resembled either of them. Races had mixed for thousands of years but one's caste remained the same. The system was established and a caste headman decided what was best for the whole caste and so ruled like a king. (471)

Life is smooth and Arsi gave birth to a son who is named Shambuka, after Shiva. The boy is so intelligent that his mother desired him to be an important official or a famous poet or a great merchant. Shiva and Bhadra both tries to reason with Arsi, but she is adamant. It is impossible and against dharma for dhobi's son to go to school. Finally, an arrangement is made for Shambuka to study. Bhadra carries him everyday to the forest where certain group of ascetics lived in recluse. Shambuka learns there about a world of freedom and hope, Vedas and Upanishads. He becomes very famous singer who sings in Sanskrit with lyrical charm.

One day, he is confronted on a Royal highway by group of priest who accused him of polluting them by being low caste. The boy challenges them on the very authority which they use to condone such caste based atrocities. This lead to the argument and exchange of Sanskrit verses on both the sides. He challenges the idea of caste based hierarchy and supremacy of one over another based on birth. The crowd gather, the head priest and King Rama arrives at the spot. Rama asks the boy,

“Son, who are you?”

“I am Shambuka, son of Shiva,” the boy murmured.

“What caste are you?”

“I do not have a caste, nor do you.” The boy looked into the eyes of the king.

“Is it true that you are an untouchable?”

“I am not untouchable, nor is anyone else.”

“Are you an atheist?”

“I am a firm believer in God, who is within each one of us. I am God and so are you.”

“Who granted permission for a Shudhra to learn the Vedas?” Rama was getting angry now.

“Do the birds need permission to fly? Do the fish swim on someone’s authority? Learning, for humans, is like swimming for fish or flying for birds.”

“You arrogant fool! Do you know the punishment meted out in our kingdom to the lower castes who are arrogant enough to break their caste dharma?” The head priest barked at Shambuka. (480-481)

In few moments, Rama draw his sword and beheaded Shambuka.

After the death of Shambuka, Bhadra’s world became dark. He started drinking and beating his wife Mala. One day, he screamed the history of Mala, being a prostitute and being raped by Ravana. He dragged her out of the house and said, “I was neither Rama nor Ravana, to accept a soiled wife as I did not belong to the high class who swapped wives... I belonged to a good middle class family that valued morality and honour above all” (487). He was arrested and presented before Rama as he commented indirectly on Rama’s wife Sita. When asked, he twisted the comment that “he was not as large hearted as Rama to accept a wife whose chastity was suspect” (487). The repercussion of Bhadra’s comment set the chain of events in motion. “The Pundits had decided that Sita was impure and that whatever test and penance she had undergone to prove her chastity in Lanka was not valid in Ayodhya. They advised Rama to get rid of this blot from his stainless life and he decided to send his pregnant wife into the forest” (488).