

Chapter Four:

Myth as Ideology in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English

The chapter analyses the selected novels by using the methodological framework related to ideology developed in chapter two. The texts are read in the light of Jamesonian political unconscious and Barthean depoliticised speech in their social and cultural contexts. Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* (2010-2013) reveals ideology of power and manipulation. Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* (2008) also talks about gender issues and reiterates such problems in the society. *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata* (2010) depoliticises certain myths in modern context. Ashok Banker's *Vengeance of Ravana* (2012) retells the story of the *Ramayana* after the war. It demystifies the idea of dharma and adharma in relation to universal balance. *Bali and the Ocean of Milk* (2011) by Nilanjan Choudhury is an example of Deva's cheating on Asuras – an indirect demeaning of Deva ideology and customs. The novel subverts the myth of Deva as good people and Asuras as evil. The novel has parallel with the blunt version of Bali myth by Jyotirao Phule. Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012) expose the issue of caste and gender. They represent the revolt against conventional norms of set by the ideology of the dominant class. These novels evidently describe the longing for utopia and ideological function of myth. Already demystified, they reveal the reality of the society in their political unconscious.

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

The novels have abundant examples of myth as ideology. The novels unfold how things are emptied out history and made natural to the characters and people of Meluha and Swadeepa as well.

Meluha society has Varna-system (caste-system). People have to wear certain amulets with symbols drawn on them. The lines drawn on amulet represent a symbol of the head of the Parmatma – the almighty representing the Brahmin caste. Similarly, lines are drawn to represent shoulder, thigh and foot represent Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra caste respectively.

The caste of the people is decided by their birth, but they have complete freedom to choose their tribe. All the people from Meluha have to wear a bracelet with an amulet that contains impression of the particular bird, animal, flower or fish that depicts their chosen tribe. Nandi explains the process of choosing tribe to Shiva,

This second amulet depicts my [Nandi's] chosen-tribe. Each chosen-tribe takes on jobs which fit its profile. Every Meluhan, under the advice of their parents, applies for a chosen-tribe when they turn twenty—five years old. Brahmins choose from birds, while Kshatriyas apply for animals. Flowers are allocated to Vaishyas while Shudras must choose amongst fishes. The Allocation Board allocates the chosen-tribe on the basis of a rigorous examination process. You must qualify for a chosen-tribe that represents both your ambitions and skills. Choose a tribe that is too mighty and you will embarrass yourself throughout your life if your achievements don't measure up to the standards of that tribe. Choose a tribe too lowly and you will not be doing justice to your own talents. (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 39)

The bracelet symbolically reflects the ability and the chosen-tribe of the person who wears it. High tribe Brahmins like Brahaspati wears Swans-amulet and the people like Nandi wears Bull or Ox and King Daksha himself wears the goat symbol amulet on their wrists. People are free to choose their tribe symbol when they recognize their innate abilities and inner strength. Nandi's remark on the chosen tribe gives an impression of providing free chance to everyone to choose work according to their ability. In the name of justice to our abilities, the people are assigned the work, but this does not remove the caste system by birth imbibed in the society. Meluha still practices the Varna system of old mythology. Chosen-tribe just works as an eye-wash the evils of the caste hierarchy.

The royal family members get special treatment at the expense of public exploitation. For the betterment of the few, many have to suffer. The giving of so much of somras is an example of ideological way to manipulate things by the people who has power. When Shiva and Sati argue for this special treatment, Daksha reveals that apart from somras manufacturing unit at Mount Mandar, there is another secret facility to produce somras. When they are together in Shiva's quarter at the time of Kaartik's birth, there is a soft dispute among Shiva, Sati and Daksha that grows serious by the time.

‘Your Highness, I don't think it is wise for you to give away so much Somras powder,’ said Shiva... Shiva was shocked at the large amount of Somras powder Daksha had got with him as a present for Kartik. Daksha wanted Kartik to start taking the Somras from birth, every day, so that he would grow to be a strong, powerful warrior. He had got enough powder to last until Kartik's eighteenth birthday! ‘My Lord,’ said Daksha, ‘it's not fair for you to

tell a doting grandfather what he can or cannot give his first grandchild.’ ‘But My Lord, with the destruction of Mount Mandar, you must be running short on Somras supplies. I don’t think it is right for so much to be given to my son, when your entire country could use the blessings of the Somras’. [said Shiva]. ‘Let me worry about that, My Lord. Please don’t say no.’ [said Daksha] Shiva gave up. ‘How are the plans to rebuild Mount Mandar coming along?’ ‘It’s taking too long,’ said Daksha, waving his hand dismissively. ‘Let’s forget about that. This is such a happy event. I have a grandchild. A whole, complete, handsome grandchild who will grow up to be the Emperor of India!’ (*The Secrets of the Nagas*, 121-122)

Even Sati refuses to give so much of quantity of Somras to Kartik. Meluha needs it more than Kartik. She is disturbed and troubled since she comes to know about the special treatment Kartik is receiving from her father only because he is Royal. Shiva and Sati are idealist people who would never compromise when it comes to the principles of Lord Ram. Sati disapproves the way her father addresses in a patronizing manner. She tells her father that Meluha needs somras more than Kartik. The discussion gets hot between father and the daughter about the Raj Dharma and the principles of Lord Ram. Daksha playing with words and using his power waves of every reason to refuse Somras for Kartik. Daksha tries to prove every accusation with an ideal answer. The following lines from the book prove that how powerful people get special treatment forcefully or voluntarily. And how the common mass is exploited in the name of the safety and security of the people in power.

‘Let Meluha be my concern, my child,’ said Daksha. ‘You worry your pretty little head only with Kartik.’ ‘My child,’ smiled Daksha. ‘Meluha is safe.

Safer than it has ever been. I don't think you need to doubt my abilities to care for my people.'

'Father, I'm not doubting your abilities. Or your commitment. All I'm saying is that I feel it's wrong for Kartik to receive such a large share of Somras that rightly belongs to the people of Meluha. I am sure there is an immense shortage of the Somras after the destruction of Mount Mandar. Why give so much to my son? Just because he is the Emperor's grandson? This is against Lord Ram's rules.' [said Sati] Daksha laughed out loud. 'My darling daughter, nowhere do Lord Ram's rules say that an emperor cannot give Somras powder to his grandchild.'

'Of course the exact words will not be there, father,' argued Sati, irritated. 'And it is not about the exact words. It is the principles that Lord Ram had set up. An emperor must always put his people above his family. We are not following that principle.' 'What do you mean we are not following that principle?' asked Daksha, sounding angry. 'Are you calling me a law-breaker?' 'Father, please keep your voice low. Kartik will wake up. And if you are favouring Kartik over the common Meluhans, then yes, you are breaking Lord Ram's laws.' Veerini cringed. 'Please...' Ignoring Veerini's plea, Daksha ranted. 'I am not breaking Lord Ram's laws!' 'Yes, you are,' said Sati. 'Are you saying you have enough Somras for the Suryavanshis? That Kartik is not benefiting at the cost of another less fortunate Meluhan? Unless you promise me that, this Somras powder will just lie waste. I will not let anyone give it to Kartik.' 'You will hurt your own son?' asked Daksha, turning briefly to glance at his sleeping grandson, before glaring at Sati. 'Kartik is my son. He will not

like to benefit at the cost of others. Because I will teach him what *raj dharma* is.’ His own daughter accusing him of not following his royal duties? Daksha exploded. ‘I HAVE TAKEN CARE OF MY RAJ DHARMA!’ Kartik woke with a start and Sati reached out for him instinctively. His mother’s familiar fragrance calmed him instantly. Sati turned and glared at her father.

‘I didn’t want to tell you this,’ said Daksha, ‘but since you are bent on hurting Kartik’s interests, listen. Another Somras manufacturing facility exists. Maharishi Bhrigu ordered me to build it secretly many years ago. It was a back-up for Mount Mandar. We kept it secret because there are traitors in our midst.’ Sati stared at her father in shock. Veerini was holding her head. ‘So my beloved child,’ said a sarcastic Daksha. ‘I have followed my raj dharma. There is enough Somras for all of Meluha for centuries to come. Now give the drink of the gods to Kartik every day till he turns eighteen. He will go down in history as the greatest man ever.’ Sati didn’t say anything. She still appeared shocked by the news of the secret Somras manufacturing facility. There were hundreds of questions running through her head. ‘Did you hear me?’ asked Daksha. ‘You will give the Somras to Kartik every day. Every day!’ Sati nodded. (*The Secret of the Nagas*, 132-134)

Sati is helpless and shocked at the knowledge about the extra facility developed for the people with power and position. The ideology is being demystified in its own way. Where people are suffering in Meluha, anything wrong that happens in Meluha Chandravanshis are blamed. Nagas are held responsible for the ‘terrorist’ attack on mount Mandar. It is quite shocking that Meluha too has certain secrets to maintain that even the princess like Sati is unaware of.

The most striking part in the novel is Shiva's encounter with Anandmayi and the Pandit towards the end of the second part of trilogy. The language deployed confuses the mind of Shiva in the case of the Dharmayudh – Holy War and its genuineness. It is Shiva who permitted the Holy War and wants his vengeance on the Chandravanshis for their killing of Brahaspati whom Shiva recognized as his brother. The bond between the two was so strong that Shiva could not bear the death of the person who is very close to his heart. After much slaughter of Chandravanshis, Shiva is victorious. The war is declared over and Chandravanshi king Dilipa is imprisoned. Shiva realizes the truth that the Chandravanshis are not evil but rather they are different from Suryavanshis and being different does not make them evil. Shiva feels great remorse within. He doubts his action of killing the innocent Chandravanshi people. Evil then is discussed very philosophically while Shiva is being consoled by the Pandit in the Ayodhya temple. When Shiva asks the reason for everything that has just happened, the Pandit replies,

‘The destruction of evil? Wouldn't you consider that a very important reason?’

‘But I did not destroy evil,’ yelled Shiva. ‘These people aren't evil. *They're just different.* Being different isn't evil.

‘Exactly. They are not evil. They are just different. (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 391)

The Pandit reveals the fact about Lord Rudra, the earlier Mahadev. Shiva is compared and proved better than previous Mahadev – Lord Rudra, who destroyed Asura in the same manner as Shiva annihilated the Chandravanshis. Shiva thought himself being misled. But the Pandit once again interrupts with his wise arguments. He

asks Shiva how he came to know about Asura and decided that they were evil. Shiva's answer to that was by 'reading...!' (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 391). But before he completes his statement from where he read, he understood the whole game of language and words. Shiva has read somewhere about evil in Asura and those books must be written by the Devas. The same way, Suryavanshis described Chandravanshis as Asuras and evil. The Pandit says,

The Devas and the Asuras, just like the Chandravanshis and the Suryavanshis, represent two balancing the life forces – a duality... yes, a duality that is one of the many perspectives of the universe – the masculine and the feminine. The Asuras and the Suryavanshis represent the masculine. The Devas and the Chandravanshis speak for the feminine. The names change, but the life forces they embody remain the same. They will always exist. Neither can ever be destroyed. Otherwise the universe will implode. (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 392)

And thus they see their fight with the other as the eternal struggle between good and evil. Only Mahadev can help them to decide the difference between two such universal forces. It is only He who can recognize the good and evil. That is the reason that the Neelkanth belongs to none but an outsider – devoid of any bias and prejudice who can judge the action with his own wisdom and intellect. The term evil has been proved relative and its meaning is altered. There seems no difference between Asura and Devas, Suryavanshis and Chandravanshis. Even Chandravanshis have waited long for their Neelkanth. The hero is disillusioned by the arguments of Anandmayi. Finally the Pandit who introduced himself as Vasudev ends the inner conflict of Shiva. With

their discussion, it is made clear that nobody is evil and it is Shiva who will meet evil and will have to recognize the same.

Dharma is not defined as religion in a narrow sense. Rather it is given a broader plain. The word encompasses holy, right knowledge, right living, tradition, natural order of the universe and duty. Finally it suggests the 'Kartavya'. Essentially, dharma refers to everything that can be classified as 'good' in universe.

Another very elaborative example of revealing myth making process is the title of the novel itself. The first part of the trilogy depicts Nagas as follows,

‘They are cursed people, my Lord,’ gasped Nandi. ‘They are born with hideous deformities because of the sins of their previous births. Deformities like extra hands or horribly misshapen faces. But they have tremendous strength and skills. The Naga name alone strikes terror in any citizen’s heart.’...

Nandi continued, ‘The city of the Nagas exists to the south of the Narmada, beyond the border of our lands. In fact, it is bad luck to even speak of them, my Lord!’ (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 59)

They are outcast and not allowed to live in the Sapt Sindhu – the land of seven rivers: Indus, Saraswati, Yamuna, Ganga, Sarayu, Brahmaputra and Narmada. The land is mandated to be inhabited only by Suryavanshis and Chandravanshis by Lord Manu. When Shiva asks why they have attacked him, Nandi said, “‘Because of the Chandravanshis! What levels have these two-faced people sunk to? Using the demon Nagas in their attacks! In their hatred for us, they don’t even realise how many sins they are inviting on their own souls!’” (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 59). Nagas are portrayed in the negative light and are created by the politics of Suryavanshis. People

of Meluha are kept away from the reality of these people. Things are manipulated in such a way that both Suryavanshis and Chandravanshis blame each other for their attacks on Neelkanth. The reality lies somewhere else.

Kali, Sati's deformed twin-sister is described as follows,

Standing a little to her left was the Naga Queen. Her entire torso had an exoskeleton covering it, hard as bone. There were small balls of bone which ran from her shoulders down to her stomach, almost like a garland of skulls. On top of her shoulders were two small extra appendages, serving as a third and fourth arm. One was holding a knife, clearly itching to fling it at Sati. But it was the face that disturbed Sati the most. The colour was jet black, but the Naga Queen's face was almost an exact replica of Sati's. (*The Secrets of the Nagas*, 236)

When Sati encounters her dead son Ganesh for the first time, the dark mystery of Meluhan Empire is revealed. The revelation of utopian Meluha, built upon the politics of Daksha, is surprising. Sati was told by her father that she had a stillborn child. But the fact was that the child was born with physical deformity. Hence, he is considered Naga and abandoned. Kali reveals the secret that Ganesh is the abandoned child of Sati with certain physical deformity.

The Naga's forehead was ridiculously broad, his eyes placed on the side, almost facing different directions. His nose was abnormally long, stretching out like the trunk of an elephant. Two buck teeth stuck out of the mouth, one of them broken. The legacy of an old injury, perhaps. The ears were floppy and large, shaking of their own accord. It almost seemed like the head of an elephant

had been placed on the body of this unfortunate soul. (*The Secrets of the Nagas*, 235)

The element of suspense and its disclosure is the key to reveal the underlying ideology. The title of the novel itself is "*The Secret of the Nagas*". Nagas were the people abandoned by Meluhans who are born with certain physical deformities. They are as sharp and strong as any common Meluhans but because of the discriminating and biased law of the state, they have to remain in the forest and must not come back. The secret becomes darker when it is revealed further in the third part. Though Somras has a positive effect on the body by prolonging life years and it allows people to have a healthy life, it has negative impacts too. Brahaspati explains politely in a quite scientific way,

‘We used to believe the Somras blessed one with a long life by removing poisonous oxidants from one’s body. But that is not the only way it works... It also operates at a more fundamental level. Our body is made up of millions of tiny living units called cells. These are the building blocks of life... Then you’d know that these cells are the tiniest living beings. They combine to form organs, limbs, and in fact, the entire body... These cells have the ability to divide and grow. And each division is like a fresh birth; one old unhealthy cell magically transforms into two new healthy cells. As long as they keep dividing, they remain healthy. So your journey begins in your mother’s womb as a single cell. That cell keeps dividing and growing till it eventually forms your entire body... Obviously, this division and growth has to end sometime. Otherwise one’s body would keep growing continuously with pretty disastrous consequences. So the Almighty put a limit on the number of times a cell can divide. After that, the

cell simply stops dividing further and thus, in effect, becomes old and unhealthy... Every cell reaches its limit on the number of divisions at some point or the other. As more and more cells in the body hit that limit, one grows old, and finally dies... and the Somras removes this limit on division therefore, your cells keep dividing while remaining healthy. In most people, this continued division is regulated. But in a few, some cells lose control over their division process and keep growing at an exponential pace... [which develops into cancer] This cancer can sometimes lead to a painful death. But there are times when these cells continue to grow and appear as deformities – like extra arms or a very long nose. (*The Oath of the Vayuputras*, 15-16)

This is how the Nagas are the creation of the excessive use of Somras. Most of the Naga people belong to Meluha where the Somras has been consumed extensively. They define Nagas as people with deformities but never realised of the miseries they have to go through. The irony is that even Vayuputra council considers the Naga suffering as collateral damage in comparison to the good done by Somras. The historical reality of the negative impact of Somras is naturalized by imposing the sins of the previous births on the children born as Nagas. Kali narrates her anguish,

One cannot even begin to imagine the physical pain and torture that we undergo as children when these “outgrowths” occur. Nagas are born with small outgrowths, which don’t seem like much initially, but are actually harbingers of years of torture. It almost feels like a demon has taken over your body. And he’s bursting out from within, slowly, over many years, causing soul-crushing pain that becomes your constant companion. Our bodies get twisted beyond recognition so that by adolescence, when further growth finally stops, we are

stuck with what Brahaspati politely calls “deformities”. I call it the wages of sins that we didn’t even commit. We pay for the sins others commit by consuming the Somras. (*The Oath of the Vayuputras*, 16)

The Nagas are the affected people from the negative impact of Somras. The novel leads to another darker secret of Somras and the manipulation of people in power to hide it from the world. The people of Meluha are told that the reason behind dying Saraswati is some devious Chandravanshi conspiracy which is untrue. The process of producing Somras requires massive amount of water to churn Sanjeevni tree and stabilize the mixture during processing. As Saraswati is the mother river of all civilization, the Somras production plant is taking away the lifeblood of future progeny. For sake of luxurious living of few, the whole future generation is put to risk. Apart from that, there would be terrible side-effects and environmental imbalance. But the worst of all, the plague of Branga is the outcome of Somras.

The Somras... generates large amounts of toxic waste... It cannot be disposed of on land, because it can poison entire districts through groundwater contamination. It cannot be discharged into the sea. The Somras waste reacts with salt water to disintegrate in a dangerously rapid and explosive manner. (*The Oath of the Vayuputras*, 18-19)

Only fresh water, colder the better, the best in the form of ice can reduce its toxic strength. To save India from its devastating effect, the toxic waste is being disposed into the river called Tsangpo situated in the high up Himalayas in Tibet. But Tsangpo which means purifier in local Tibetan tongue – flows through high mountains, instead of flowing towards Burma, takes the form of Brahmaputra and crosses Branga.

And so Branga people are being poisoned. Though they are free from deformities, they suffer from the disease like cancer and body-wracking.

The whole action in the world of Meluha is a schema of well-controlled great plan. The Vayuputra council and others in position of power have full control over the happenings in the novel. Most of them are pre-determined and manipulated. The third part of the trilogy, *The Oath of Vayuputra* reveals the politics and ideology behind controlling people and power. The most important segment of the power politics is Somras. Many unanswered questions are resolved and secrets revealed. The whole lifespan of Shiva becomes a small part of a doll in the performance of the great plan of producing Somras and controlling people. Shiva realizes that he is just a small puppet in the name of Neelkanth and Mahadev. Not only Somras, even the creation of Neelkanth is also the part of the great plan.

Shiva was being evaluated and trained by his uncle to be Neelkanth. To become Neelkanth, Shiva must acquire certain quality – to fight against evil. As Manobhu had faith in Lord Ram, he created Shiva, Lord Neelkanth. One day when Shiva was sitting with his uncle, the process of the creation of Neelkanth took place. Shiva has complained of burning pain between his eyebrows.

Gopal narrated the whole story to Shiva. According to him, Lord Manobhu was the one who supported the argument that Somras was turning evil. He could not convince the council so he isolated himself from the council and went back homeland. He was one of the Vayuputra Lords, one of the Amartya Shpand, a member of the council of six wise men and women who rule the Vayuputras under the leadership of Lord Mithra. Lord Manobhu turns out to be Shiva's uncle. Shiva suffered a lot because

of the burning pain between his eyebrows which was named as third eye later in the novel.

[Third eye] is the region between one's brows. It is believed that there are seven chakras or vortices within the human body which allow the reception and transmission of energy. The sixth chakra is called the ajna chakra, the vortex of the third eye. These chakras are activated by yogis after years of practice. Of course, they can also be activated by medicines. The Vayuputras use medicines to activate the third eye of those amongst their young who are potential candidates. (*The Oath of the Vayuputras*, 111)

But Lord Manobhu believed that Shiva was born with pre-active third eye. He, hence chose Shiva to be the recipient of the Vayuputra medicine which is more suitable for those candidates who have this eye active.

The uncle reached into his coat and pulled out a small pouch. 'This is a very precious medicine. I have carried it for a long time. And I feel you are the correct person to receive it.'

Shiva took the pouch. Opening it, he found a reddish-brown thick paste inside. 'Will it make the burning go away?'

The uncle smiled. 'It'll set you on the path of your destiny.' (*The Secret of the Nagas*, 143)

Shiva was trained and prepared biologically as well as psychologically from the beginning of the novel to execute his function as Neelkanth. Shiva's dreams that haunts him from his early childhood becomes very important when he comes to know that it

actually was a reality. In one of the dream, Shiva was reminded medicine given to him by his uncle. Shiva was informed about his destiny in advance.

Pointing towards the gargantuan Himalayas extending beyond the Mansarovar, the uncle continued. 'My child, your destiny is much larger than these massive mountains. But in order to realise it, you will have to cross these very same massive mountains.' The uncle didn't feel the need to explain any more. He took some of the reddish-brown paste and applied it on Shiva's brow, in a neat vertical line, up from between his eyes to his hairline. Shiva felt immediate relief as his brow cooled down. Then the uncle applied some paste around Shiva's throat. He took the remaining portion of the medicine and placed it in Shiva's right palm. Then he cut his finger lightly and dropped a little bit of blood into the paste, whispering, 'We will never forget your command, Lord Rudra. This is the blood oath of a Vayuputra.'

Shiva looked at his uncle and then down at his palm, which cradled the strange reddish-brown paste mixed with his uncle's blood. 'Put it at the back of your mouth,' said the uncle. 'But don't swallow it. Massage it with your tongue till it gets absorbed.' Shiva did that. 'Now you are ready. Let fate choose the time.' Shiva didn't understand. But he felt the relief the medicine gave. (*The Secret of the Nagas*, 143-144)

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

The illustrious retelling is also full of ideological explanations in Barthes' terms. There is another very good example of convenience of using magical divine powers in the text. When Pandu tells Kunti to invoke another Deva, she says,

‘No, I have been with four men,’ said Kunti. ‘If I call another, I will be known as a whore. So it is decreed in the books of dharma.’ Pandu thought the four men Kunti was referring to were the three gods and himself. Kunti, however, was referring to the three gods who had given her three sons after marriage, and the one god who had given her one son before marriage—a secret that she shared with no one. (48)

The criticism of the above argument is given in a separate block. This elaboration provides with the critique of such customs and their manipulation.

The number of men a woman was allowed to go to if her husband could not give her children was restricted to three. Including the husband, a woman thus could be with up to four men in her life. If she went to a fifth man, she was deemed a whore. This law gains significance later in the epic when Kunti lets Draupadi marry all five of her sons.

As per some Vedic marriage rites, a woman is first given in marriage to the romantic moon-god, Chandra, then to the highly sensual Gandharva named Vishwavasnu, then to the fire-god, Agni, who cleanses and purifies all things, and finally to her human husband. Thus, the ‘four men’ quota is exhausted. Clearly this was an attempt of society to prevent Hindu women from remarrying. (48)

The similar law would be bent by Kunti herself later in the novel when Arjun and his four brothers came home with Draupadi.

‘Look what I won at the tournament, mother,’ said Arjuna.

Without turning around, Kunti said, ‘Whatever it is, share it equally with your brothers.’

‘But it is a woman,’ said Arjuna.

Kunti turned around and found the beautiful Draupadi next to Arjuna. She also noticed that all her sons were attracted to her. Fearing that a woman would disrupt the unity of her sons, she said, ‘What I have said must be done if you are truly my sons, provided dharma allows it.’

Dharma did allow it. Yudhishtira narrated the story of Vidula who according to the ancient chronicle had married the ten Prachetas brothers. With this reference, there was nothing to stop Draupadi from becoming the common wife of the five Pandavas. (91)

This is how her marriage to five men is provided with logical and natural explanation with the use of rebirth paradigm.

In her past life, Draupadi had invoked Shiva and asked for a husband who was honest, a husband who was strong, a husband who was skilled, a husband who was handsome and a husband who was knowledgeable. Shiva had said, ‘You will get all five men that you want for no single man, except God, can have all those qualities.’

In another past life, Draupadi was Nalayani, the wife of a Rishi called Maudgalya. He had a terrible disease that made him cough and spit all day and covered his skin with scales and rashes. Still Nalayani served him as a devoted wife. Pleased with her unstinting service, the sage offered her a boon. Nalayani requested that he use his ascetic powers to indulge all her sexual desires.

Accordingly, Maudgalya took the forms of many different men, some human, some divine, all handsome, and made love to her in many different ways. After indulging in sexual pleasures for many years, Maudgalya decided it was time to renounce the world. But Nalayani was not satisfied. ‘Who will make love to me after you are gone?’ she asked. Disgusted by her insatiable lust, the Rishi cursed her that in her next life she would be the wife of many men. (92)

The first day of the war is narrated by Sanjay to Dhritrashtra,

As the sun reached the zenith, he said, ‘Those warriors, O monarch, longing to take one another’s life, began to slay one another in the battle. Throngs of chariots, and large bodies of horses, and teeming divisions of infantry and elephants in large numbers, mingled with one another, O king, for battle. We beheld the falling of maces and spiked bludgeons and lances and short arrows and rockets hurled at one another in that dreadful engagement. Arrow showers terrible to look at coursed like flights of locusts. Elephants approaching elephants routed one another. Horsemen encountering horsemen, and chariots encountering chariots, and foot-soldiers encountering foot-soldiers, and foot-soldiers meeting with horsemen, and foot-soldiers meeting with chariots and elephants, and chariots meeting with elephants and horsemen, and elephants of great speed meeting with the three other kinds of forces, began, O king, to crush and grind one another.’ (244)

The earth is narrated in the following way,

At the end of the day, when the soldiers withdrew to their battle camps, this is how Sanjay described the battlefield: ‘The earth, covered with blood, looked beautiful like a vast plain in the season of rains covered with red flowers.

Indeed, the earth assumed the aspect of a youthful maiden of great beauty, attired in white robes dyed with deep red. Variegated with flesh and blood, the field of battle looked as if decked all over with gold. The field, O monarch, indented with the hoofs of the steeds, looked beautiful like a beautiful woman bearing the marks of her lover's nails on her person. Strewn with those fallen heads that were crimson with blood, the earth looked resplendent as if adorned with golden-coloured lotuses in their season. Many steeds with garlands of gold on their heads and with their necks and breasts adorned with ornaments of gold, were seen to be slain in hundreds and thousands. And strewn with broken chariots and torn banners and brilliant umbrellas, with shredded chamaras and fans, and mighty weapons broken into fragments, with garlands and necklaces of gold, with bracelets, with heads decked with earrings, with headgears loosened off from heads, with standards, with the undercarriage of upturned chariots, O king, and with traces and reins, the earth shone as brightly as she does in spring when strewn with flowers.' (244-245)

The above passage reveals the secret desire of many in the *Mahabharata*. The beautiful earth ornamented like the newly wedded bride. That's the repressed desire which is manifested through the description of war. The earth did become beautiful like bride clothed in red, but in the blood of humans.

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

Ashok Banker's *Vengeance of Ravana* (2012) explicates certain ideological traits by describing dharma, to define evil in terms of the other, and necessary crimes to be done to control people. In the beginning of the novel, when Rama won the war and people were chanting songs in his praise, King Jambavan tells him, "Command

them, they are yours, as yours, as are the earth, the sky and the sea, and everything in them. You are the master of the world now. Rule it as you see fit” (09). This is the law of the land. The situation of the people does not seem to be changed very much. They were ruled by Ravana as he saw it fit, and now they will be ruled by Rama in the same ‘fit’ way. Rama justifies the war in the name of dharma where he himself is aware about the loss and price of the war. He addresses the crowd before him,

Comrades, all we have accomplished, all we have achieved, all we have endeavoured towards, all we have struggled, fought, strategized, manoeuvred, battled, bled and sacrificed for, is upon this field. It is our dignity, our honour, our pride and our dharma. At this hour of battle – with the tide turned, the enemy vanquished, the master of the land fallen, the siege, broken,, the fortress overrun – any army could be expected to wreak havoc, to ravage and forage, to rape and pillage, to partake the spoil of war. (11)

He says that he could have cleansed the whole world from rakshasa race forever. He could have done much harm to their women. But he did not do it by claiming that this was the war for dharma. He continued,

We came, we fought, we conquered... and then we rebuilt. We restored. We rehabilitated. We took nothing, but we gave everything. And by so doing, we gained the greatest riches possible, the most precious spoils of war, that which every soldier secretly craves but rarely hopes to acquire: the love and forgiveness and admiration of our enemies. (13)

Thousands are slain from both sides, children and women became shelter-less, a new order is established in the name of dharma. When talking about dharma, Rama fought the war of Lanka, the novel shows how even dharma can be the puppet

of powerful people. When the words of Mandodhari hear diplomatic and harsh reply from Rama, she says,

I expect no less from you, Rama of Ayodhya or from your bloodthirsty warmongering countrymen. Ayodhya's reputation for war and invasion is legendary. Even today, the mere mention of your father Dashratha is enough to put little rakshasas to sleep, over three and half decades after the Last Mortal Invasions. (177)

When Mandodhari reveals the true identity of Sita as the daughter of Ravana, and mentions Rama as an imposter, she is killed by Shatrugan. The woman, a visiting queen, unarmed, is shot dead by javelin. And knowing that it is Shatrugan who fired javelin, Rama remains silent. Towards the end of the novel, dharma is further demystified by Lord Shiva. He says,

Dharma is the prerogative of Yamadev, my friend. We are devas. We are above dharma. We serve the infinite Shakti of brahman. All-pervasive, all-inclusive... You are Nilameghashyama... With your eternal paramour Lakshmi by your side, you lie in yoganidra, maintaining the balance of creation and destruction eternally. Without you, Brahmadev and I are incomplete and Creation itself would become dangerously imbalanced. That is why you must remain aloof and above such mortal preoccupations such as karma, artha, kama and ... dharma. Leave dharma to Yamadev and to these mortals – Shiva indicated the world at large around them – it befits them. We live by the demands of higher calling. (268)

The quote means how meaningless Rama's killing of Ravana was and the whole journey of the establishment of peace and dharma. The words of Shiva clearly suggest

Rama to remain aloof from four worldly attractions – karma, artha, kama and dharma. It latently means that even an incarnate like Lord Rama is affected by them. Though Lord Shiva says that they have higher things to consider, it too reveals that they follow certain higher power.

In the end, Rama accuses Sita of hiding the truth about her sons and herself and sends her to exile. When Sita asks for the reason why she has to get separated from his beloved husband, she received an explanation from Yama,

Because you and Rama are not mere mortals. You are devas... Lord Vishnu the Preserver. And His Eternal Paramour Lakshmi... your rightful places are in your own celestial place Vaikuntha. Not here on the mortal place Prithvi-loka. Every additional day you spend here you disrupt the Balance. And by doing so you are playing into the very hands of the one who conceived all this and opened the Vortal in the first place, in order to avenge himself upon you. This is all part of his great plan. And by staying here and denying your true nature, you are feeding into his plans, making possible the true vengeance of Ravana. (293)

***The Palace of Illusion* by Devdutt Pattanaik**

Narrated from Draupadi's point of view, Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) takes us back to the time of the Indian epic the *Mahabharata*. The novel exposes the issue of gender and revolt against conventional norms of the ideology of dominant class. Through her narrator Panchaali, Divakaruni gives us stereoscopic view of an epic story. The novel gives voice to Panchaali, the fire-born heroine of the *Mahabharata*, as she weaves a vibrant retelling of the ancient epic saga. Beginning with Draupadi's magical birth from fire, the novel narrates her stratagems to take

control of her household from her mother-in-law, her complicated friendship with the enigmatic Krishna, and her secret attraction to the mysterious man who is her husbands' most dangerous enemy – Karna. Though Panchaali grows up in isolation from most people except for Dhairya Ma, Krishna, and Dhriti, she is a fiery female voice in a world of warriors, gods, and ever-manipulating hands of fate.

The novel provides certain prominent examples of ideology in terms of Roland Barthes. The close reading of the novel brings the realisation that everything in the life of Draupadi was predetermined and fixed. Draupadi just has to perform the role. From her birth to the last day of her life, she remains a puppet in the hands of male dominated ideology. The people with power manipulate and rule the world. The destinies of two most helpless characters – Draupadi and Karna – were predetermined and deliberately manipulated by Krishna and Sadhubaba – probably Vyasa. Draupadi is told everything in advance by Sadhubaba, the holy-man, the fortune teller.

You will marry the five greatest heroes of the time. You will be queen of queens, envied even by goddesses. You will be a servant maid. You will be mistress of the most magical of palaces and then lose it.

You will be remembered for causing the greatest war of your time.

You will bring about the deaths of evil kings – and your children's, and your brother's. A million women will become widows because of you. Yes, indeed you will leave mark upon history.

You will be loved, though you will not always recognise who loves you. Despite your five husbands, you will die alone, abandoned at the end - and yet not so. (39)

This threatening, alarming, astonishing prophecy comes out in the very beginning of the novel where by Panchaali becomes the central part of the “Great Design” (40). When she denies to marry and makes changes to that Great Design, she is told,

Only a fool meddles in the Great Design. Besides your destiny is born of lifetimes of karma, too powerful for me (holy man) to change. But I will give you some advice. Three dangerous moments will come to you. The first will be just before your wedding: at that time, hold back your question. The second will be when your husbands are at the height of their power: at that time, hold back your laughter. The third will be when you’re shamed as you’d never imagined possible: at that time, hold back your curse. May it will mitigate the catastrophe to come. (40)

Draupadi is warned and at the same time she is told what to do to avoid such disasters. Draupadi is given those ‘hold back’ suggestions which prove that after receiving warning, males or fate or any karma would not be responsible for the consequences. Escapism can be seen very clearly. It seems so natural to believe that if she had had her ‘hold-backs’, the course of her life would have been different. As such, it is bound to happen. Things are presented as very natural and so unquestionable. But when demystified, they reveal a whole set of ideological mechanism and its deliberation. Draupadi is the by-product of the task of Drupad’s revenge. Her name, identity and life are snatched away from her.

When it comes to predetermined roles of people in the society, the examples of Karna, Draupadi, Arjuna and many others are fit the argument. Draupadi is shown the portraits of all princes by the artist. She gets attracted by the portrait of Karna. When

the artist tries to introduce the great warrior, he is stopped at once by Krishna. He says, “Why are you showing the princess that man’s painting? He’s no prince... He’s just the son of a chariot driver” (70). When the issue of ideology is taken into consideration, Karna is an apt example that fits the argument. Karna is denied the attention because he is no prince, he is given the kingdom of Anga as a gift and an insult to the Pandavas. He is doomed because he never knew his parentage and being low-caste.

The idea of Arjun’s love is manipulatively inculcated in Draupadi’s mind by Krishna. Initially Draupadi is attracted towards Krishna and then towards Karna. Draupadi’s love for Karna is denied on the basis of his untold parentage, his being lower caste and his attachment with Duryodhana. Had Karna not been denied to Draupadi and Arjun’s love not inculcated in her by Krishna’s manipulation, the whole course of history would have been different.

In her Swayamvara, Panchali ends up marrying Arjun instead of falling in love with Karna. Arjun’s mother Kunti accidentally tells all four of Arjun’s brothers to share whatever it is that Arjun has brought, causing Panchali to marry all five of the Pandavas. Here, she is treated as an object and not as human. She is distributed equally among all brothers only because the mother’s utterance cannot be defied. If we dig deep into this layer of semiological system, we find that it all happened because of the karma or the ‘Great Design’.

When the novel is studied in the context of culture as text, it is clearly visible that the novel reveals some crucial social problems regarding gender and caste. Sikhandi and Karna are examples. When Sikhandi returns as a man, he reveals the deep dark truth of patriarchal and gender-biased society with the use of the story of gender transformation of Sikhandi. When Draupadi comes to know about her, she wants to

meet her. Dhairya informs her that she is not a woman any longer. Draupadi asks, “Do you mean she no longer behaves like one?” (45).

It is the behavior of the woman, which is always given to her, decides her gender. The question of role of men and women becomes complicated with the intrusion of male transformed Sikhandi. The core texts that reflect socio-cultural framed gender norms are challenged with the entry of something strange in the context of the center. Draupadi is trained for years about the proper behavior of women by Dhairya Ma. Draupadi is very excited to meet her sudden-found sister who is now a warrior. She wonders about,

What she looked like. Was her body hard and muscular, her arms scarred from weapons? Or was it her heart that had changed so that it no longer shook at the thought of killing? How had she survived in the forest—for she must have been just a girl when she left? What terrible crime could she have committed for our father to banish her at that tender age? And why did she want to speak with me, alone? Perhaps finally I’d have in her what I’d so longed for: a friend with whom to whisper and laugh about silly things, to exchange ornaments and confidences, to tell my secrets—even that of the spirits’ prophecy, which I held inside me like a dark, jagged rock. (45)

During the short stay with Draupadi Sikhandi tells his story,

He said: Have you heard the fable of the donkey that wrapped himself in a lion’s hide so the other animals would fear him? Or of the wolf that hid under sheepskin so he could mingle undetected with his prey? I feel like both sometimes. A fake—or a hidden menace.

No, I didn't pray to the gods to be changed. I'd lost faith in them a lifetime ago. This time I invoked a yaksha. He appeared in the sky with his burning demon sword. When he heard what I wanted, he laughed and plunged it into me. The pain was unbearable. I fainted. When I awoke, I was a man. And yet not completely so, for though my form was changed, inside me I remembered how women thought and what they longed for. (46)

The story of Sikhandi is a clear example of text-within-the-text. It also reveals the false ideal world of men. To overcome the patriarchal system, women have to fake their appearance. Though Sikhandi is transformed, he still remembers the womanly ways of thinking. The desires and longings remain same.

When this episode is analysed in contemporary context, it has a strong relevance to the society and its character formation. The gendered roles are manipulated and presented as natural to woman in such a way that they never feel deceived. Characters like Sikhandi, who revolt against the system, have to go through such transformation – a donkey under lion's skin or a wolf under sheepskin. The phrases overtly reveal the hollow and shallow ideological world of man. Though seeming very natural and timeless, they still contain certain kind of ideological relations with the contemporary culture and society.

When it comes to social issue of preference of male child over female, Draupadi provides an apt illustration. Divakaruni exemplifies it through the story of her brother Dhri and the identity crisis Draupadi always felt about her name. Draupadi makes Dhama to tell the story of her birth again and again fancying many names for it. She was not named as Dhri was named.

The story inspired me to make up fancy names for myself [Draupadi]: Off-spring of Vengeance, or the Unexpected One... When your brother stepped out of the sacrificial fire onto the cold stone slabs of the palace hall, all assembly cried out in amazement. An eye blink later, when you emerged from the fire, our jaws dropped. It was so quiet, you could have heard a housefly fart. (01-02)

Not only that, but it also provides information about how politics works at various dimensions. Be it ideology, caste or gender.

The novel strongly criticizes the dominant male ideology. The male world, full of politics, gambling, war, glory and fame is considered somewhat strange in comparison with that of the women. In her novel, *The Matter of Time* (1992), Shashi Deshpande mentions the myth of Brihannala – a eunuch. In the novel she posits that Arjun becomes Brihannala because he is tired of the male world of war and violence.

What about Arjuna becoming Brihannala? Yes, that was easy; Arjuna, tired of the male world of war and violence, of relating to woman only as a lord or conqueror, became Brihannala the eunuch, so that he could enter the gentle world of women, of music, and dancing and become insider in this world. (85-86)

A similar weariness of the male world can be found in Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusion* where Draupadi reunites with Karna at the end. She asserts that had she been married to Karna, he would not have gambled her away like Pandavas. Yet, this resolution too, is equally transient. She is falling prey to another male world - the male world of Karna. Rebirth and after-life paradigm is ideological layer in Barthean way of thinking. Draupadi's attraction towards Karna and her union with Karna and

Krishna at the end of the novel after their death is unlikely to resolve the issue of ideology with the rebirth paradigm.

In the words of Lotman and many Marxists, it is the form in which the content finds shape and expression. Form of literature and any art is ideologically specific. The novel can also be read as fantasies of middle-class and their problems. The novel reflects harsh realities of contemporary urban modern life of women. It provides their imaginary solutions – in terms of war, revenge and wish fulfillment that might resolve or manage or repress the evident class anxieties aroused by the existence of an “Industrial working class and an urban lumpen proletariat” (*Political Unconscious*, 186). In Jamesonian perspective, in the fallen world of capitalism – rather late capitalism where every desire is resisted and refused to its fulfilment, Draupadi is very much aware about her loss of her palace – her home. She never gets it back once she left it. The return is denied and refused.

All the adult desires are due to lack of some kind. The novel can be read as Draupadi’s desire for Karna or Krishna which is substituted by attainment of the Palace of illusions. Desire of a particular object is at one and the same time allegorical in general.

This creates a sort of ‘literature special effect’ of a bourgeois fantasy whereby affluent living is presented as ‘natural’. Utopia as the household is the fantasy of the novel. Losing palace is also the desire for Utopia. Tough illusions but still eye catching. Attempt to escape from the tensions inconsistency of actual world.” (*Political Unconscious*, 155-160)

These grounds determine the shape of fantasy of Divakaruni. The symptom of wish fulfilment are the symptoms of logic of lacanian imaginary. Divakaruni is an ideological spokesperson for women in 21st century.

The novel is a utopian refuge from the nightmare of social classes. The end of the war won by Pandavas is the resolution to the problems of dharma, caste and gender discriminations and heralds the elimination of every problem on earth. But at the end, if the history behind is reconstructed, the war is the result of a long battle of capital gain only. The gambling match is nothing but the reification of people whoever they might be – a wife, brother or the self. The novel beautifully presents realist texture that reflects increasing commodification of 21st century capitalism (*Political Unconscious*, 155-156). Under every character lies some social totality. When their functions are over, they become relics. They become old overnight. Krishna and Arjun, Bhima and Draupadi are the examples of such social utilitarian approach. Their old age and death are naturalise in such a way that they hide society's approach of using individual at a time to maintain the balance.

Draupadi is treated as commodity in the novel. Her role, her name, and everything is determined the sage and the karma and the Great Design. She had the desire to marry Karna, but she was instructed to deny him because of the ideological vision of the caste system of that time. Draupadi is a locus in the history and her character is ideological construction which naturalises in the last instance in 21st century globalization. The novel romanticises everything in the end by presenting the woman free to attain their desire in the society. When Draupadi unites with Karna in her after life, the novel has another realist dimension of limiting ones desire which are possible only in the world of the dead. The romantically and dramatically presented end tries to

resolve the problems of contemporary world in the magical world since there is no resolution in this real world. Divakaruni, with sources available in late capitalism, determines and conditions the way, character like Draupadi can be written at first place.

Bali and the Ocean of Milk by Nilanjan Choudhury

The later (informal) part of the novel – mentioned as the consequences of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk – can be read in terms of myth as ideology. Devas' cheating on Asuras is an indirect demeaning of Deva ideology and customs. It somewhat subverts the myth of Deva as good and Asura as evil especially in the case of King Bali and Indrah. The major difference between them is that Indrah always thinks about how he looks and Bali always asks whether he is a good king. Bali believes in the rights of women. Instead of avenging the death of his father Vritra by war, he avenged it by signing the Treaty of Tripura on his own terms. Though he hates gods a lot, he loves the youth more. He prefers development and human rights more than treating them dreadfully like previous asuras. In the time of Indrah, the Deva kingdom lags behind whereas the Asura people flourished during the reign of King Bali. Bali is loved by all and he is kind and brave. During his reign, in the words of Andhaka,

Tripura is known for the progress it has made in the arts, for its pursuits of knowledge, its magnifying cities and its green field of grains. We [Asura people] are no longer the barbarians of the past who did little more than hunt animals, harass the rishis and plunder the homes of men. We asuras can look the devas in the eyes now, as equals, instead of feeling the shame and jealousy of our ancestors. (21)

Even then, Indrah was not ready to deliver nectar to asuras. Though asuras proved to be better people by following and accepting certain deva traditions and

policies, they are still considered the root of all evil and chaos. When Indrah shows his worry about delivering nectar to their eternal rival, Viru interrupted,

Whoever said I would hand over anything to him [Bali]? ... I have no intentions of letting a bunch of asuras overdose on nectar and wreak havoc on the universe... The asuras will become dispensable once the churning yields the potions. When the time is right, I will step in and relieve our friends of the burden of immortality. Leave that to me. After all, in one of my later avatars, I am expected to be quite an expert in stealing milk and butter, or so the scriptures foretell. (87)

Bali is very much aware about this approach of devaa towards asuras. When his wife Avani asks about his decision to cooperate with the Devas to achieve amrit, he reminds, Avani that many of his ancestors died even if they were blessed or booned with immortality. Immortality is just an illusion. He tells Avani,

How can I accept just like that? Immortality is the oldest trick in the book. The gods have been duping asuras with false promises since the dawn of history. How many examples do you want: Nishumbha, Mahishasura, Raktabeej, Hiranyakashipu! The gods granted boons of immortality to each one of them and look at what happened. All dead and gone. Murdered by the same gods who granted them the boons. (122)

Asuras have been exploited since time immemorial.

When Indrah feels old age approaching, the reason behind his losing strength, potency, his power over his weapon Vajra is none the less because of the killing of Vritra. Vritra was massacred in his sleep. Indrah killed him peevishly and unethically.

He always thought him as asura. But the lineage reveals that he was a brahmin. The heinous act of killing a Brahmin in his sleep shows his cowardice. He committed Brahminicide by killing a Brahmin. For the law of deva land will have its reflections. Indrah suddenly lost his all powers only because he killed a brahmin. Had he killed any other asura, the course would have been different.

When the idea was put forward by Viru for the churning the ocean of milk, there are arguments about the creatures living in the ocean. But even the Gods are somewhat indifferent when it comes to their immortality. When they reveal their plan to churn the ocean and get the amrit, Goddess Prithvi, anxious about the creatures of the Ocean, shoot out of her seat like an arrow and exclaimed,

‘Churning the ocean!’ she cried. ‘But what about... what about the millions of sea animals and plants and plankton that will die in the process? Have you considered its devastating effects on the marine ecosystem? Fellow gods, this is madness. Our greed is blinding us. The violence we inflict on nature will come back and destroy us. I do not –’ (83)

Indrah stops her in between and insists that they have no choice. The plan cannot be cancelled because the majority of the council agreed to get the amrit at any cost. It seems here that the council follows the rule ‘for few to be immortal, many must die’. Prithvi reacts again about the poison and shows her anxiety about the devastating effect which would leave the earth as a dessert and a wasteland, she is told, “A barren desert where we can live like gods is better than a green paradise with arthritis and old age” (83). The acquisition of nectar is of prime importance even if everything else on the earth is destroyed and vanished. Not only that the gods are inconsiderate about animals and other creatures of the ocean but they stoop to the level of collaborating

with asuras whom they always considered evil and low. When the picture of the plan of team A – Asuras and team B – Devas is shown the reactions of gods are eye catching.

At once a flurry of agitated voices sounded.

‘What? Asuras!’

‘Team up with those dirty blackies! How awful!’

Ridiculous! Why would Bali ever help us? We killed his father.’ (85)

Viru intervenes and convinces everyone that he is no asura lover. The churning requires both devas and asuras. Only then, the amrit can be achieved. Gods have to take the help from asuras. Viru take the responsibility not only of convincing Bali to help in the mission, but he assures that amrit won’t fall into their hands. Bali is called a modern asura who does not believe in the long lasting wars between devas and asuras.

There was the question of asuras being immortal.

Indrah said, ‘We all know that Bali aspires to better the gods. It would be the height of foolishness to hand over the power of nectar to such an ambitious and dangerous rival.’

‘Whoever said I would hand over anything to him?’ Viru smiled. The council stared at Viru. He winked back.

‘You won’t?’ Agni ventured.

‘Of course not,’ Viru smiled. ‘I have no intentions of letting a bunch of asuras overdose on nectar and wreak havoc on the universe.’

‘I completely agree that it is our moral duty to save the nectar from the clutches of the asuras,’ Varun said. ‘But how will you manage it?’

‘The asuras will become dispensable once the churning yields the potions,’ Viru said. ‘When the time is right, I will step in and relive our friends of the burden of immortality. Leave that to me. After all, in one of my later avatars, I am expected to be quite an expert in stealing milk and butter, or so the scriptures foretell.’

The council chuckled obsequiously. (87)

The above example clearly shows the shrewdness, craftiness and schema of devas. It also reveals their attitude towards asura as low caste people. Not only Indrah and other gods, but even Virubears a similar opinion.

Suketu, the head of the Brotherhood, gains his hold over the situation after the churning episode. King Bali is under complete influence of Suketu and keeps himself to the temple of Mahakali, grieving the death of his beloved wife Avani and his unborn child. Bali is completely blind toward the policy of Suketu of leading the kingdom towards a totalitarian state. The policies, he introduces, are examples of dystopian fantasy. After the restoration of King Bali as the king of Tripura, Bali revives the disfunctional Department of Culture and appoints Suketu as its head. After he becomes the head, he wastes no time in performing his duty sincerely and approaches the king with new policies. One of them is The People’s Priesthood. It has mainly three duties,

The first duty of the priests will be to engage with the people and win their hearts. Our priests will talk to the people, visit their homes, meet their families – in short, become their friends. The second duty will be to endure the

masses. Teach them what true asura culture is all about, help them understand the Book, conduct special classes in schools so that children imbibe our traditions from an early age etc. Now if these are done well, then the third task, which is to enlist more and more people formally into the movement, becomes relatively simple. (220)

Suketu deliberately manipulates his whims and fancies to control the people in his own cruel way. Began with the Brotherhood, he expands his empire of totalitarianism into a concentration camp. He establishes the People's Priesthood in the name of promoting asura culture. The establishment of certain selected persons from old brotherhood and some new recruits, Deva traditions would be removed completely from the asura culture. But in the name of reviving and promoting the age old asura culture he starts controlling people with different state apparatuses. Initially it is ideological and if people do not obey, he uses brutal forces like royal army and weaponry. The women have to go through tonsuring ceremony – shaving their head completely. They cannot wear colourful clothes but have to wear Jabba. Men has to wear Rishab instead of dhoti which is considered Brahmin's clothe.

It is very clear in the novel how he dehumanizes the rights of all the people. The priesthood actually would work as secret police to control public rebellion and opposition. Foolish people like Yami Devi are appointed to higher ranks to find out rebels and Brahmins from the street. They become the toys in the hands of powerful people like Suketu. Suketu tries every possible way to punish Brahmins for their age old ill-treatment to asura people.

It is easy to fool people like this when it comes to power. In one of the remarks of Yami Devi, it seems that they are tired of Brahminist tradition and very angry with

them. They want to avenge their long suffering under deva traditions. When Yami Devi's husband warns her about her being used by priesthood and asks why she is supporting in providing information about other Brahmins, she says, "Because it's about time the Brahmins were taught a lesson. They have been bossing over us too long" (231).

Apart from that, there is MCP – Moral Cleansing Program – more terrible than People's Priesthood. Suketu calls it Spiritual Revolution. Everyone has to register into it. The rules are stricter than priesthood or any brotherhood. It is named after 'one nation, one law' (226). But that would result in the killing of variety and colorfulness of the society. For some it would prove oppressive and violent. In that, everyone has to follow asura customs including Brahmins for example, they have to wear rishabs instead of dhotis, women must shave their head and men must keep beards and everyone has to pray to goddess Mahakali six times a day. Everyone would be treated equally, no more special rights to anyone.

The darker side of the MCP is revealed when the Brahmins are taken to MCC – Moral Cleansing Camps. It reflects Nazi's Concentration camp during the WW II. Initially, only Brahmin men were taken, but soon it was extended to women and children too. They are dragged out of the homes and rehabilitated in the camps. They were starved, and killed and buried.

Bali is kept in dark with the details of the policy and he passes the policy in blind faith of Suketu. Most of the policies like above were signed by Bali. The important thing to notice is that they are too complicated and lengthy that Bali always avoided to read them fully. He blindly believes Suketu and passes the resolutions. He

has no idea about what treatment is being meted out to the people. Suketu exploits every aspect of Bali's power.

Though the novel provides happy end where peace is restored to peace and people can live happily ever after, the novel reveals the latent problems of the people. The people like King Bali can be manipulated easily by the people like Suketu and Indrah. The people like Viru, Suketu, Bhrigu and other gods will never think of people and their welfare when it comes to their power and immortality. Lastly, the people will hardly be benefited whoever the ruler may be.

The myth of Bali has been treated and interpreted with various perspectives by critics. Two texts, *Bali and the Ocean of the Milk* and *Asura* by Anand Neelakantan, use myth of Bali in different way but closer look reveal that they share some commonality. Both the books have some sympathy towards asura race. There seems a connection of these retellings of Bali myth with the Jyotirao Phule's version in *Gulamgiri*. Translated as *Slavery*, the book demystifies Aryan invasion and Glorious Past.

Looking at myths of various Avatars of Lord Vishnu with skepticism, Jyotirao Phule promotes the demystification of myths to undo social relations and caste hierarchy. According to him, Hindu myth has latent part that can disclose social material reality. They can be read as social history in terms of struggle between Brahmins (higher caste) and non-brahmins (lower castes). He criticizes the customs mentioned in the books of mythology written by Brahmins. Brahmins deliberately legitimized the stories of gods and demons to justify their dominance. The stories serve as mask for perpetuating power of higher caste over the lower caste. By looking at their historical foundations, Phule questions ancient myths in terms of rationality.

He criticizes Vishnu's Matsya Avtar, Varah Avtar, Narsingh Avtar and VamanAvtar. He questions Krishna myths of his lifting up Govardhan Parvat and his battle with giant serpent Vasuki.

They are turned out to be the stories of power, supremacy and control. Aryan invasion introduced their victims as lower caste and legitimized the actions with inventing various stories of Vishnu. By promoting Vishnu as god with divine powers, they called people who fought against Brahmins as rakshasas or demons. As they did not follow Brahmin customs and social norms, they were written as evil. Phule also questions the authenticity of *varna*, or caste system.

Phule deconstructs the myth of demon King Bali which is popular among upper and lower castes. The myth has different versions for both the castes. Lower caste worships Bali whereas Brahmins treat him as demon. The myth carries much importance as it is deeply rooted in folklores Marathi region. According to Phule, Bali is a peasant king in Marathi folklore and the festivals like *Diwali* and *Raksha-Bandhan* commemorate him. Phule draws connections of non-Brahminic gods to their regions and weaves his narrative about Bali.

In her article "Exploring Past Myths through Giambattista Vico and Jyotiba Phule", Aparna Devare narrates the Puranic version of the myth of King Bali as follows:

In the Puranic rendition, Bali, the great-grandson of Hiranyakashyapu, is considered a great ruler for his many benevolent virtues. He is most well-known for his generosity. As he is the follower of the Brahmins of the Bhrgu race they bring him back to life once Lord Indra defeats him and honour him with a sacrifice that makes him just as powerful as Lord Indra. Bali is successful

in his subsequent battles with Indra, who realizes he cannot defeat his enemy unless Bali is made to turn against the Bhrgu Brahmins. In other words, Indra has to create a situation where Bali insults or humiliates his mentors. Bali enjoying the support of the Bhrgus becomes practically invincible in his power and glory and is also a popular ruler amongst his people.

The gods were concerned about Bali's rise, and hence Vaman the dwarf was born as one of the Vishnu's incarnations in order to defeat Bali and restore cosmic balance. Vaman comes as a Brahman, as Bali's guest and knowing that Bali is very generous makes a request. Bali in turn is very respectful towards him and is well known for his hospitality. He tells Vaman he can ask for anything he wants. Vaman first praises Bali (and his grandfather Prahlad) and asks him for a small piece of land that would equal his own three strides. Bali who is known to never insult a guest readily agrees. His mentors the Bhrgus recognize that Vaman is actually Vishnu who has come to defeat Bali and try to warn him. They advise him to reject Vaman's request as self-preservation, they point out, is more important. But for Bali principles come first. He cannot break a promise he has made to his guest. The Bhrgu sage Sukracharya feels insulted as Bali spurns his advice and curses him.

Once Bali agrees to Vaman's request, Vaman the dwarf transforms into a giant and takes three strides. His first stride covers the earth and sky, while the second, the heavens. Vaman asks Bali where he can take his third stride as he has covered all the three worlds of earth, heaven and sky. Bali who is bound up in cords, offers that Vaman can take the third or last stride on his head. Vidhyavali, Bali's wife pleads with Vaman to spare her husband but he ignores

her requests. Vaman declares that Bali's defeat is inevitable and necessary but recognizes that Bali is courageous and generous; thus, he grants him a concession that Bali will upon his death ultimately go to heaven and take the form of Indra later but until that time will have to live in the subterranean region of Sutala. In this manner, the Puranas suggest, Vaman restores the cosmic order by giving the heavens back to Lord Indra and satisfying his mother, Aditi.

(Aparna Devare, 2016)

Phule rationalize this myth by advocating the argument that Vaman and Bali are historical figures. Vaman was a Brahmin leader, an Aryan invader, who defeated Bali at the battles of Balisthan. Vaman defeated Bali and his son Banasura, destroyed the capital and took all the gold. By demystifying the myth of Bali, Phule and Anand Neelakantan voices the dark side of Aryan invasion and subvert the myth of Glorious Past.

Asura: Tale of the Vanquished by Anand Neelakantan

Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012), written from the perspective of two major characters the high born ambitious Ravana and the low born poor Bhadra, reveals the ideology of caste. The story is given a voice to two characters poles apart – Ravana one of the most powerful half Brahmin asura king and Bhadra a poor farmer of lower caste. The story of the *Ramayana* has another side, the story of Ravana. Ravana has his different story to tell, completely opposite from the story that has been sung for centuries. The story dares to tell the tale to reveal the ills of Deva traditions.

The novel can be read as demystification of Deva myth by reconstructing or reimagining the past of the Asura tribe. The untold history of Asura people and the

manipulation of Deva is rewritten from the perspective of Asura. The dialectics of the story explicates the politics behind subversion of the *Ramayana* myth.

The novel also exemplifies other myths like the myth of King Bali [Mahabali] and Vishnu's reincarnation as Vaman Brahmin. Anand Neelakantan tries to give it a history in modern context. It explains how king Bali was taken from first order semiological system, put into second order semiological system and emptied history. The novel recounts the story of King Mahabali in the following quote.

Here was the greatest and mightiest of all Asura kings. The wise, the strong, the learned, the kind, the perpetrator of social justice, the icon of dharma – paeans run out when one thinks of Mahabali. But was a hint of contempt hovering at the back of my mind? Mahabali had conducted brilliant military campaigns, vanquished his foes and ruled over a continent justly, but he lost his empire because he did not want to back out of a promise he had given to a poor Deva Brahmin, Vamana Vishnu, seeking alms from the mighty Emperor. When Mahabali's reign was at its summit, the Emperor conducted a Rajasooya, to proclaim his suzerainty over all of India. Kings, chieftains, rajas and maharajas, belonging to all the tribes and kingdoms of India assembled at the Asura capital of Muzuris to pay homage to the king of kings, Mahabali. As a part of the ritual, the Emperor promised a boon to anyone who asked for it. It was at that time that the Vamana Vishnu, disguised as a poor Brahmin boy, asked for three feet of land to set up a Brahminical learning centre in the Asura capital. Not wanting to go back on his promise, Mahabali gave permission to Deva Brahmins to preach their religion in the Asura capital. Soon, this small centre grew into a massive missionary institution. It became the hot-bed of conspiracy and court

intrigue. Finally, before the Asura elite could work out what had hit them, Deva Brahmins had overcome the last Asura Empire. (27-28)

Another example of emptying out history is the stealing of Asura God shiva. The novel tells the story of the great king Shiva who united the shattered Asura tribes and established the great empire.

The Asuras were a casteless society and had a highly democratic set up where an elected council, instead of a king, held actual power. They were also a roaming tribe, hunting and raiding for their existence, but somewhere, perhaps 2000 years ago, they settled down in cities and towns along the river banks. It has been said that the Asura kingdoms had roads paved in gold. But what an empire they built! It sprawled from the Indus in the west to the Brahmaputra in the east, and from the Himalayas in the north to the Narmada in the south. It could easily have been the biggest empire on earth at that time. When the kings of Egypt were busy building great tombs to bury themselves, the democratic council of the Asura kingdom was busy laying roads, building hospitals, drainage systems and everything they thought was useful for the people. (21)

As Asura people were never so overtly religious, they had their own gods. The prominent god was Shiva or Parmeshwara. Shiva was great Asura king of antiquity. He is Ravana's personal favourite.

The Asuras were a free people. Their fertile imagination made Shiva into a lovable God who demanded nothing, and no ritual was required to pray to him. He was the Asura's friend, cousin, son, father, or anything one could imagine. In many cities, Shiva was portrayed as a phallus, to celebrate virility and fertility. (22-23)

During the reign of Shiva, the empire grew in all directions – Culture, music, art, architecture. Before deva invasion of Asura kingdom, the tribes flourished in all ways. Gradually, they lost their fighting spirit because of culture, music, art and architecture. They once again became roaming, hunting, raiding tribes. That caused Asura tribe a great loss.

Deva attacked the kingdom and things changed. After Deva invasion, things were manipulated. Devas destroyed everything valuable and worth mentioning in the history of asuras as any invader would remove the traces of the superior culture to prove their's more powerful and supreme. Not only had they destroyed the cities but also,

Thousands were slain; women irrespective of age, were gang-raped, children burnt alive and granaries plundered. Magnificent cities crumbled. A civilization was destroyed and the clock of progress was set back by centuries. The Asuras lost everything and they fled to the south. The Nagas withdrew to the eastern hills and the Kinnara and Yaksha kingdoms were wiped out. The Gandharvas became a wandering tribe and soon got long lost in the by lanes of history and mythology... They stole the great Asura God, Shiva. Brahma, the teacher, also became their god. However, the most prominent God who suddenly appeared was Vishnu. The Brahmins, who were the official priests of the Devas, began formulating complicated rituals. They found that the main strength of the Asura cities was its cosmopolitan culture. (22-23)

Apart from this, the stories of Sita's trial by fire and Shambhuka's killing are reconstructed. Sita is a totem so is Shambuka. Sita's belongingness to asura as well as deva tribe corresponds to Shambhuka's belongingness to lower caste by birth and

higher caste in terms of knowledge. Stereoscopic view and dialectical thinking provide the space to analyse the epic in more structured way.

The novel puts forward many questions that may help to reconstruct the past of the text. The unanswered questions like “Why did the King go into exile for fourteen years at the whim of his step-mother when the whole city wanted him to stay? Was he not aware of the wishes of his subjects then? Why did he kill Bali through deceit? What was the justification for sending his pregnant wife away when she had committed no wrong? Why was he pushing her again and again into the fire? Why did he kill Shambuka?” (489) are brought on the surface and answered logically to solve the problem in Jamesonian terms. Finally the novel reveals how the loser’s tale can be manipulated to control people for a long time.

The novels like Amish Tripathi’s *Shiva Trilogy*, Ashok Banker’s *Vengeance of Ravana*, Nilanjan Choudhury’s *Bali and the Ocean of the Milk*, Chitra Banerjee’s *The Palace of Illusions* and the like are to be read as romances in Jamesonian terms. They offer a symbolic resolutions to the social and political problems in aesthetic acts. They fulfil the desire for utopia towards their end.

The last volume of Shiva Trilogy, *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, is an example of fulfilment of utopian desire. Shiva with the use of his Pashupatiatra, destroys Devagiri, the very symbol of the power and control and the Somras manufacturing factory into it. With that the whole empire of Daksha fell down. There was the raise of new hope. Ashok Banker’s *Vengeance of Ravana* with its special effect and time-space travel proves to be an epitome of Indian philosophy of Maya. By providing the necessity of balance, the novel offers a temporary solution of eternal conflict between good and evil. *Bali and the Ocean of Milk* hails the end of the fascist set up engineered

by Suketu. At the end of the novel, Lord Viru – Vishnu kills him by his Chakra and gives a new hope to the people for the better world. Two novels, Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions* and Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* provides a satisfactory resolution of the social problems of gender and caste respectively – the first by rebirth paradigm and the latter by the fulfilment of indirect revenge.