



**Deconstructing Myth and Power: The Subversive Narratives in Anand
Neelakantan's Ajaya Series**

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Abstract:

Mythology has always been a crucial part of human culture, significantly shaping beliefs, values, and social structures. It influences human consciousness by offering stories that explain the mysteries of existence, the natural world, and moral challenges. Myths often form the basis for religious practices and cultural identity, affecting everything from personal behavior to community traditions. However, as societies change, myths are reinterpreted through a process called demythologization, where traditional tales are analyzed with modern perspectives to uncover their symbolic meanings rather than their literal interpretations. The reinterpretation of mythology is becoming increasingly popular, with various scholars and authors shedding new light on ancient myths and questioning their relevance today. Writers such as Devdutt Pattanaik, Amish Tripathi, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have made significant contributions to this conversation, reshaping mythic narratives to align with contemporary values like equality, justice, and self-empowerment.

In this landscape, Anand Neelakantan's works, especially the Ajaya and Asura series, have been instrumental in promoting the trend of mythological reinterpretation. Neelakantan examines mythology from the viewpoint of the defeated and marginalized, providing an alternative narrative to the conventional heroic stories. His works challenge the moral absolutism found in epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, fostering a more inclusive and humanistic understanding of these ancient tales. Neelakantan's reinterpretation adds a vital perspective to how mythology is viewed, establishing him as a key figure in contemporary Indian literature.

This research paper will examine how Anand Neelakantan's Ajaya series reinterprets Vyasa's Mahabharata. By focusing on the narrative through the eyes of the Kauravas and other marginalized characters, it seeks to reveal the deeper meanings behind Neelakantan's revisionist take on the epic.

Keywords: Mythology, Deconstruction, Subversive Narratives, Reinterpretation, etc.

Introduction:

Anand Neelakantan stands out in contemporary Indian English fiction for his daring reinterpretation of ancient myths and epics. He burst onto the literary scene with *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012), which presented a unique take on the *Ramayana* by telling the story from Ravana's perspective. This was followed by the well-received *Ajaya* series, which reimagines the

Mahabharata through the eyes of the Kauravas, focusing on characters often seen as villains. Neelakantan has also made significant contributions to the *Baahubali* franchise with his *Rise of Sivagami* trilogy, further establishing his reputation as a versatile storyteller.

His themes often challenge conventional ideas of good and evil, as well as heroism and villainy. Neelakantan's works

delve into the narratives of the defeated, marginalized, and misunderstood, pushing back against the moral absolutism found in ancient epics. Through his novels, he highlights issues of caste, inequality, and societal power dynamics, offering readers a more complex understanding of history and mythology. As a prominent voice in Indian English fiction, Neelakantan has motivated a new generation of writers to delve into alternative viewpoints within mythological stories. His creative approach has broadened the genre, encouraging newcomers to innovate in storytelling and question established narratives.

Ajaya: Roll of the Dice, the inaugural book in Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya* series, presents a thought-provoking retelling of the *Mahabharata* from the perspective of the Kauravas. Rather than portraying the Pandavas as the unquestionable heroes, Neelakantan highlights the often-overlooked voices—especially Duryodhana (Suyodhana) and his supporters to challenge the traditional dichotomy of good versus evil. Suyodhana is depicted as a tragic hero who advocates for equality, justice, and the upliftment of lower castes, contrasting sharply with the Pandavas, who are shown as embodiments of orthodoxy, rigid hierarchy, and the status quo.

The novel dissects the epic by examining the systemic inequalities of caste, class, and power that permeate ancient society. Characters like Karna and Ekalavya are given more intricate portrayals, as their battles against caste discrimination and marginalization take center stage. Neelakantan's depiction of Guru Drona, Bhishma, and even Krishna exposes their roles in upholding the established order. By reversing the narrative and exploring the human complexities of its characters, *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* encourages readers to reconsider the concepts of dharma (duty), adharma (injustice), and the ambiguous

boundaries between heroism and villainy. The book provides an alternative perspective on history, rooted in realism, social critique, and compassion for the oppressed.

In *Ajaya: Rise of Kali*, the second installment of the *Ajaya* series, Anand Neelakantan continues to reimagine the *Mahabharata* from the viewpoint of those who were defeated. The story unfolds after the notorious game of dice, leading to the gradual downfall of the Kauravas and the impending war at Kurukshetra. Neelakantan further develops the character of Suyodhana, who is depicted as a ruler attempting to reconcile his personal beliefs with the political demands of a fractured society.

The novel presents a grim depiction of a society in decline, plagued by deep-rooted social hierarchies, religious fanaticism, and opportunism. Characters like Krishna, the Pandavas, and Draupadi, typically viewed as embodiments of virtue, are shown in a more morally complex manner. Krishna, in particular, is portrayed as a cunning strategist, with actions that blur the distinction between divine intention and political maneuvering.

Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Rise of Kali* also highlights the futility of war, as the battle of Kurukshetra symbolizes the peak of social and moral decay rather than a victory of good over evil. The book's exploration of themes such as caste, power struggles, and human vulnerability remains relevant, providing a critical perspective on justice and ethics within the framework of mythology. The novel wraps up Neelakantan's endeavor to humanize the so-called villains, offering a sobering reflection on both the victors and the defeated.

Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya* series, which includes *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* and *Ajaya: Rise of Kali*, offers a fresh take on the *Mahabharata* by highlighting the Kauravas' viewpoint. This new interpretation of the epic exemplifies demythologization, as it removes the divine aspects of traditional

narratives and examines them through a more human and socio-political lens. Neelakantan challenges established norms, questions societal structures, and provokes thought about widely accepted beliefs. His approach encourages readers to consider the intricate relationships of power, caste, and morality in both mythological and modern settings. Demythologization involves stripping away the mystical elements from classic myths to reinterpret them in a more logical, often secular way. This transformation turns a revered text into a narrative about imperfect individuals caught in political, social, and ethical dilemmas, free from divine influence or predetermined destiny.

In *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*, the character of Krishna is depicted not as an all-knowing deity, but rather as a clever political strategist motivated by personal ambition and practicality. This interpretation challenges the typical view of Krishna as a symbol of divine justice, instead presenting him as a figure with complex and sometimes unclear motivations. Likewise, the Pandavas, who are usually seen as paragons of virtue, are shown as defenders of a harsh social order rooted in strict caste divisions. This reimagined version of the *Mahabharata* compels readers to reconsider the moral dichotomies of the epic and to view its characters as multifaceted individuals influenced by human emotions and societal pressures.

The reexamination of myth also applies to the Kauravas, especially Duryodhana known as Suyodhana in the novel, who is often portrayed negatively in the original epic. Neelakantan's *Ajaya* series reinterprets Suyodhana as a tragic hero, advocating for social equality and justice in a fractured society. His characterization challenges the traditional narrative that elevates the Pandavas while demonizing the Kauravas. Instead, Suyodhana emerges as a leader who stands against the rigid caste

system, fights for the rights of marginalized communities, and questions the societal norms that sustain injustice. This fresh take on the *Mahabharata* amplifies the voices of marginalized characters who are frequently overlooked in the conventional story, such as Ekalavya, Karna, and the Nishada tribe. One of the most notable ways Neelakantan's *Ajaya* series diverges from traditional conventions is by questioning the moral absolutism found in the original *Mahabharata*. This epic is often viewed as a tale of dharma (righteousness) triumphing over adharma (injustice), with the Pandavas symbolizing good and the Kauravas representing evil. However, Neelakantan challenges this binary perspective by offering a more nuanced and morally intricate version of the story. In his retelling, the lines between good and evil become blurred, revealing that the actions of both the Pandavas and the Kauravas are influenced by personal desires, political ambitions, and societal pressures.

For example, the notorious game of dice, during which Draupadi is disrobed and humiliated, is usually depicted as a pivotal moment of Kaurava villainy in the traditional *Mahabharata*. Yet, in *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*, Neelakantan sheds new light on this event, illustrating how Suyodhana is manipulated by his uncle Shakuni and motivated by a sense of injustice rather than pure malice. This reinterpretation encourages readers to reconsider the typical portrayal of Suyodhana as a cold-hearted villain and to explore the complexities behind his actions.

Additionally, the *Ajaya* series breaks from traditional norms by highlighting characters who are often overlooked in the original epic. Karna, the son of a charioteer, and Ekalavya, a tribal archer, are shown as victims of an unjust social system that discriminates against them based on their caste and birth. Neelakantan's depiction of these characters underscores the entrenched

inequalities within the caste system and the hypocrisy of a society that maintains such hierarchies in the name of dharma. By amplifying the voices of these marginalized figures, Neelakantan moves away from the elitist viewpoint of the original epic, presenting a more inclusive and democratic narrative. At its core, Neelakantan's *Ajaya* series critiques the rigid social structures and hierarchies that have persisted in Indian society for centuries. A significant theme in the novels is the caste system, with Neelakantan challenging the moral justification of a system that condemns individuals to a life of oppression and servitude based solely on their birth. Through characters like Karna, Ekalavya, and Jara, the series sheds light on the injustices faced by those born into lower castes and the contradictions within a society that professes to uphold dharma while perpetuating inequality.

Neelakantan's depiction of the Pandavas as defenders of the status quo further questions long-held beliefs about righteousness and justice. The Pandavas, especially Yudhishtira, are portrayed as complicit in maintaining the caste hierarchy and supporting a social order that favors the elite at the expense of the marginalized. This representation challenges the traditional view of the Pandavas as models of virtue and prompts readers to reevaluate the values that have been handed down through generations. Additionally, Neelakantan's critique encompasses the role of religion and ideology in justifying social inequality. The concept of dharma, frequently invoked to rationalize the actions of the Pandavas and other characters in the original epic, is scrutinized in the *Ajaya* series. Neelakantan presents dharma as a means of maintaining power and control over the masses, revealing the contradictions within the epic's moral framework and encouraging readers to critically assess the influence of religion on social and political structures. Neelakantan's

Ajaya series has made a notable impact on modern readers and writers by providing a new and critical viewpoint on one of India's most cherished epics. In a society still wrestling with issues of caste, inequality, and social justice, the series acts as a compelling reminder of the importance of questioning entrenched beliefs and traditions. By reinterpreting the *Mahabharata* from the standpoint of the defeated and marginalized, Neelakantan's work resonates with current concerns regarding social justice and equality.

The *Ajaya* series has also inspired a new wave of writers eager to delve into alternative viewpoints within mythological stories. By moving away from the conventional hero-focused narrative, Neelakantan has opened doors for more inclusive and diverse storytelling that challenges the established norms. His work encourages writers to approach mythology with a more critical and nuanced perspective, prompting them to scrutinize the moral and social values found in ancient texts. Anand Neelakantan's writings are deeply influenced by his desire to challenge established narratives and offer alternative viewpoints on mythological tales. His goal of reinterpretation stems from a strong commitment to amplifying the voices of the defeated and marginalized, those whose stories have often been overlooked or oversimplified in traditional retellings of ancient epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.

In various interviews, Neelakantan has clearly stated that he does not aim to glorify any specific side but rather to question the moral absolutism that is often found in these epics. He perceives mythology as a dynamic medium that mirrors societal values, and through his reimagining, he aims to expose the flaws in the established social order, particularly concerning issues of caste and inequality. In

an interview with The Hindu, Neelakantan explains:

I always felt that the voices of those who were defeated in these great wars were never heard. The Asuras, the Kauravas, or Karna, Ekalavya—all these characters, who were on the wrong side of the war, never had their stories told. I wanted to bring them to the forefront. (Neelakantan)

Neelakantan in his interview with *The Times of India* also talks about how mythological stories have been reinterpreted to mirror social issues of all ages, and his inspiration behind the reinterpretation, he states:

I explored what I have heard and learned. Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas are a big ocean. Of late, I found that perhaps because of the influence of television, it has become more of one-point-of-view storytelling. If you see in India, there are multiple versions of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Most of the versions are that of the subaltern versions. They give voice to those who are vanquished and sidelined, including the women, servants, etc. Writing about them helps me bring out this perspective, and take us back to how these tales are told traditionally. (Neelakantan)

His reinterpretations act as a platform to challenge social hierarchies, bring attention to injustices, and initiate discussions on how entrenched systems, such as the caste system, have influenced both ancient society and contemporary Indian culture. Neelakantan's approach transcends simply recounting old tales; he seeks to stimulate reflection and inspire readers to scrutinize longstanding beliefs and customs that have sustained inequality.

Conclusion:

In *Ajaya*, Anand Neelakantan skillfully reinterprets the classic story of the *Mahabharata*, presenting a groundbreaking viewpoint that challenges established power dynamics. By highlighting the perspectives of the marginalized—Duryodhana, Karna, and Shakuni, he breaks down the conventional ideas of heroism, dharma, and morality typically linked to the Pandavas. Neelakantan's thought-provoking narrative reveals how myths can be manipulated to uphold social hierarchies, especially regarding caste and class, thus questioning the dominant narratives that celebrate the victors while vilifying the vanquished. His depiction of the Kauravas as not merely villains, but as nuanced characters fighting against systemic injustice, prompts a reevaluation of the distinctions between good and evil. In this way, *Ajaya* goes beyond a simple retelling of myths, transforming into a significant critique of how stories are used to sustain power. Neelakantan's work serves as a deep reflection on the nature of truth, urging readers to examine the moral underpinnings of cherished legends.

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