



<https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2025.v7n4.19>

A Cognitive Linguistic Exploration of Moral Ambiguity in *Asura* and *Lanka's Princess*

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Abstract

Mythological retelling as an emerging genre has grabbed attention of the contemporary generation. It not only takes them back to mythical stories of our sacred past, but reminds them of our cultural identity and origin. Several mythological retellings tend to challenge the long-standing dominant ideologies revolving around the ethical binary of good and evil and dharma and adharmā. This paper aims to examine Neelakantan's *Asura: The Tale of Vanquished* and Kane's *Lanka's Princess* through the lens of cognitive linguistics. It studies how traditionally evil icons of Ravana and Surpanakha are reframed in these texts using cognitive language, drawing reader's sympathies. In addition, it also draws our attention to the moral ambiguities faced by the readers after reading these retellings that shapes their understanding of dharma from a selfless deed- to a more dynamic expression of self-identity, personal justice and resistance. The paper draws on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Discourse Analysis to understand how metaphors are used in the language and how narrative tone and voices fuel this ambiguity.

Keywords: Cognitive language, Moral ambiguities, Conceptual metaphors, Ethical reorientation, Mythological retellings

1. Introduction

Myths have long served as medium to translate beliefs, stories of our cultural and ethical identities and our understanding of truth and falsehood. Mythological narratives act as a sacred

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tool in shaping the foundation of society and transmitting cultural values, establishing moral binaries, and curating collective memory. Several writers, over the period, have come up with works that present the mythological stories in its universally accepted form. However, several contemporary writers have come up with works that involve fiction and fantasy, mingling them with mythological narratives and have successfully managed to translate readers' attention and interest to mythological narratives. Over the past 20 years, modern Indian fiction has witnessed a surge in mythological retellings in Indian literature, which is characterised as epics told through new, subversive perspective. At the forefront of this movement, are writers like Anand Neelakantan and Kavita Kane, who, drawing from epics, like Mahabharat and Ramayana, challenge the conventional dichotomy of dharma-adharma, heroism and villainy and; purity and impurity.

In Indian context, characters of Ravana and Surpanakha have been classified as evil villains who stand in opposition to the righteous characters of Ram, Sita and Lakshman, framing the ethical dichotomy of evil versus good. However, contemporary mythological retellings are increasingly challenging the dominant ideological classifications. Anand Neelakantan and Kavita Kane have emerged as a significant voice in aiding to this shift by offering renewed portrayal of mythological figures, typically those, who are overshadowed or are cast in an evil light.

Anand Neelakantan stood off the beaten path, as he was the first to pioneer writings that gave precedence to the voice of infamous traditional villains. The *Ajaya* series and *Asura: The Tale of vanquished* (2012) are two of Anand Neelakantan's famed works, told from the perspective of the alleged villains or 'Losers' of the history. His portrayal of Ravana, in his book *Asura*, presents the events from Ravana's perspective, portraying him as a human with complex layers of emotions and ethical dilemma. He has been portrayed as a visionary human and ruler while illustrating the Asura society's resistance against rigid social structure ruled by the Devas' cultural ideologies.

Similarly, Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* (2016), tells Ramayana from Surpanakha's perspective, highlighting female voices that are frequently marginalised in classical epics. Surpanakha, the classic villain is shown in the light of a wounded woman who falls victim to the political manoeuvres of her family and husband and her identity is shaped through the consequences of the fateful events that befalls her. She resists her fate and decides to avenge herself, slowly turning her into the quintessential villain Surpanakha. Kane transforms the character of Surpanakha from a flat evil caricature into a profoundly wronged, wise, and self-aware character. These works reflect a literary interest in voicing underrepresented groups and providing complex interpretations that influence and shape readers' ethical ambiguousness.

Critical dive into the character of Ravana frequently oscillates between his portrayal as both a tragic hero, and the quintessential villain, in most critical analysis. According to scholars like Ramanujan (1991), there are several Ramayan traditions, many of which depict Ravana from a more sympathetic angle, empathising with him, and recognising his intelligence, devotion to Shiva and his capability for governance. "Ravana is one of the sixty-three leaders of the Jaina tradition. He is noble, learned, earns all his magical powers and weapons through

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austerities (tapas), and is a devotee of Jaina masters” (Ramanujan). While drawing from these traditions, Neelakantan’s Ravana incorporates modern sensibilities regarding caste, power, and individual ambition.

In contrast, Surpanakha’s character has received much less attention and is frequently reduced to the role of a disobedient seductress whose mutilation starts the Great War. However, a feminist interpretation of the text foregrounds how patriarchal concerns about female sexuality and agency reflect her portrayal. Kavita Kane in *Lanka’s Princess* builds on these concepts, presenting Surpanakha as a victim of political, intrigue and family treachery; thereby giving her character more emotional nuance and moral ambiguity.

While the literary research on mythological retellings and interpretations on Ravana’s character is expanding, the interaction between cognitive linguistic analysis and ethical ambiguity is barely explored. Especially, the concept of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Discourse Analysis has not been applied to the characters of Surpanakha in particular. By integrating these concepts, this paper aims to address these gaps by analysing how Neelakantan’s and Kane’s selected work reinterpret these iconic characters and how this reframing influences contemporary readers exposing them to a trench of moral dilemma.

Focusing on the characters of Ravana and Surpanakha, as represented in Anand Neelakantan’s *Asura: The Tale of Vanquished* and Kavita Kane’s *Lanka’s Princess*, this paper explores how these mythological retellings create ethical ambiguity within the readers. The study applies Conceptual Metaphor Theory by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson and draws insights from Discourse Analysis by Norman Fairclough, to examine and understand how the selected writers use language and narrative strategy to reconceptualise Dharma, gender roles, and power structures to reconstruct the readers’ reception of moral boundaries associated with these characters. It studies what role does these texts and their reception play in portraying the iconic villains, as layered human beings with tragic flaw and emotional complexities.

Central to the study, is the idea that language as a cognitive tool influences and reshapes readers’ perception. The study uses George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s Conceptual Metaphor Theory as presented in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), which suggests that people understand abstract ideas through simple everyday things, by using metaphor in their thinking, not just in their language. In stories, metaphor shapes our perception and, in this case, metaphors such as “Crown as Warfare”, “Life as a Battle” or “Womanhood as Wound” helps to explain how the writers cast Ravana and Surpanakha as morally complex being rather than evil. These metaphorical patterns create subtle influence on readers’ perception, and guide them to look at these characters as humans, through an emotionally recognisable role, invoking empathy.

In addition, the study uses insights from Discourse Analysis to understand how language constructs narrative voice, tone, and evaluative language constructs ideological and cultural meanings in both the texts. In addition, it further influences readers’ interpretation of the morality of the characters and the ethical ambiguity presented through both the text. By analysing the narrative strategies of both the authors surrounding their selected works, this study examines the shifting meaning of Dharma and cultural identity in contemporary Indian

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mythological fiction. In doing so, it also attempts to analyse the ethical ambiguity faced by the readers after reading the selected texts.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Discourse Analysis

To analyse how these moral ambiguities are created in retellings, cognitive linguistics offers helpful resources. According to Lackoff's and Johnson's, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, developed in their work, *Metaphor We Live By* (1980), metaphors are not merely ornamental devices but are essential to human thoughts and world conceptualisation. For instance, metaphors such as "rule as burden" and "war as cleansing", reinterpret Ravana's choices in *Asura*, such that they evoke sympathy instead of condemnation. Similarly, in *Lanka's Princess*, metaphors like entrapment, exile and scar are used to demonstrate Surpanakha's life as a constant struggle for autonomous agency and self-definition.

Discourse Analysis, particularly as outlined by Fairclough (1995) aids in understanding how narrative voice, point of view and linguistic framing affect readers' perception, "Discourses not only represent the world; they are also implicated in the construction of the world and in shaping the identities of social subjects"(Fairclough). "Language choices are never neutral; they position the reader through particular perspectives and evaluations" (Fairclough). Neelakantan's altering narration between Ravana and Bhadra (his foot Soldier and servant), provides a polyphonic texture to the narration, challenging any single moral truth. Readers are immersed in Surpanakha's first person narrative by Kane, who presents her emotional reality, evoking empathy within the readers, even for her morally dubious behaviour. Both strategies, oppose the rigid moral judgements frequently present in epic tradition by utilising discourse structures, as marked by Fairclough: "Evaluative language works to align readers with particular moral and ideological stances"(Fairclough).

Ethical Ambiguity

Modern retellings have set a hallmark for creating ethical ambiguity, which is created in narratives when characters or actions are difficult to categorise as completely evil or completely good. However, in reading of Ravana and Surpanakha, this ambiguity is made intentionally by the writers, in order to make the readers question their inherited traditional narrative. The Reader Response Theory, as developed by Wolfgang Iser in 1978, is instrumental in emphasizing the active role of readers in meaning making. Readers must come in truce with their own ethical conundrums, evoked as a result of interpretive gaps in *Asura* and *Lanka's Princess* such as, contradictory versions of events or morally difficult choices.

This negotiation is not just limited to private reading but, transcends into public discourse in the digital age as well. Several social media discussions, online forums, and Goodreads reviews of the selected texts reveal a wide spectrum of reactions and reviews, from applauding the humanization of villains to criticizing and disapproving of the apparent dilution of the traditional values. As Terras (2016) marks, in the context of digital humanities, readers' responses and reviews also act as important cultural text tracing the ideological current of the present age.

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Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative critical literary analysis that shall integrate close reading, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, and Discourse Analysis in examining how the morality of figures such as Ravana and Surpanakha is constructed through the plots of current mythological retellings. The two major texts for analysis in this regard include *Asura: The Tale of the Vanquished* by Anand Neelakantan and *Lanka's Princess* by Kavita Kane, both of which present alternative narrative perspectives that humanise traditionally marginalised characters.

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, close reading of the two novels identifies repeated metaphorical expressions referring to burden, war, exile, wounding, and identity. These metaphors are interpreted according to Conceptual Metaphor Theory, advanced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), which takes a view that abstract concepts are comprehended through concrete, familiar, embodied experiences. The mapping of these metaphorical structures indicates how each narrative reframes Ravana and Surpanakha's emotional and moral worlds.

The study further relies on Fairclough's Discourse Analysis, 1995, to carry out an investigation on narrative voice, point of view, tone, and evaluative language. According to Fairclough, "language choices are never neutral; they position the reader through particular perspectives and evaluations." This approach allows an investigation into how Neelakantan's technique of alternating first-person narration between Ravana and Bhadra creates a polyphonic text, or how Kane's first-person narration allows the readers to get close to the emotional reality of Surpanakha. These discourse strategies light the way into showing how the texts direct moral interpretation. The results from both the theoretical approaches are synthesized to show how metaphor and discourse cooperatively work together to destabilize rigid moral binaries associated with the Ramayana tradition. The study does not employ empirical reader-response methods, limiting itself to textual analysis. By combining these approaches, this paper shows exactly how contemporary retellings make use of linguistic and narrative structures to produce empathetic, morally ambiguous portrayals of characters that have conventionally been cast as antagonists.

Conceptual Metaphor in *Asura* and *Lanka's Princess*

The ethical reframing of mythological characters in Anand Neelakantan's *Asura* and Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* can be better deciphered using the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). Conceptual Metaphor Theory was developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). As Lakoff and Johnson claim that, "metaphor is not just a matter of language.... on the contrary, human thought processes are largely metaphorical. The human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined. Metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person's conceptual system"(Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*). According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphors are not just ornamental devices; rather they shape how humans think, structure, reason and perceive abstract concepts by projecting familial, tangible sources into more intangible target domains (Lakoff and Johnson). For instance, the metaphor, "Life is a War we fight in chapters" projects existence in terms of struggle, conflict,

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strategies and victories; while the metaphor like, “Self is the Enemy” frames one’s internal struggles as a battle against adversary.

These metaphorical mappings are handy in mythological retellings as they pose the power to recast the moral identities of characters. They act as tools that are capable of shifting readers’ perception of the characters from a morally villainous archetype to a more complex, humanised figure. The concept of Metaphorical Systematicity (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*) that focuses on how readers can “comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another” which, “necessarily hide other aspects of the concept” (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*), comes handy in understanding how the authors of selected text use these metaphorical reframing to underscore the elements that would elicit sympathy from readers for the characters. In *Asura*, Neelakantan uses recurrent metaphorical frameworks to construct Ravana’s identity, undermining the moral dichotomies found in the traditional Ramayana. For instance, the metaphor, “Life is a war we fight in chapters” which envelopes the meaning that life is a constant struggle, a series of battle, both internal and external; recurs throughout the novel infused with the central theme of the plot that depicts Ravana’s life as a never-ending struggle; struggle against his fate, against the dominance of Deva empire, against inflexibility of caste and race discrimination and even his own principles. Thus, Ravana’s aggression has been reframed as an inevitable outcome of a life subdued with constant struggle to fight against systematic oppression rather than as a trait, inherently evil. Similarly, the metaphor “Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown”, the most famous line by Shakespeare in his work *Henry IV*, suggests the psychological weight that overwhelms him as a leader and a ruler. Even when Ravana was taking his last breaths he thought of his people and blamed himself for their misery:

I could not save my people from these two warriors and their monkey-men. And he was saying I was a great ruler? I could appreciate the irony of it. I wanted to laugh at my enemy; laugh at the foolish men who trusted me and who were now lying all around, headless, limbless and lifeless. I wanted to laugh at the utopian dreams of equality for all men on which I had built an empire. It was laughable indeed. (Neelakantan)

In a similar vein, the metaphor “Crown is a yoke heavier than chains”, portrays him as a tired human who was burdened by the weight of his crown, trying to strike out a balance between responsibilities and ambition. As Ravana was dying, he thought to himself finally giving up everything, “I, Ravana, have come a long way. Now I do not have anything left to fight for; except this battle with the jackals....They’ll raise my head on a pole and parade it through the same roads that saw me racing by in my royal chariot” (Neelakantan).

This portrayal eliminates his image as a power-hungry demon and substitutes it as a tired king chained by the burdens of duty and desire. Another metaphor, “history is a one-sided story”, attempts to reframe the ethical construct of the dominant narrative. It attempts to portray Ravana as a victim of narrative injustice that spotlights the accounts of the victorious rather than the objective truth surrounding his legacy. As Bhadra observed:

Ravana was a man who lived life on his own terms, doing what he thought was right...a man who lived life fully and died a warrior’s death....is only the small detail of who

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won, that decided the hero and the villain, in their epic life stories. As time goes by, Rama may become God and Ravana the demon, for one was put in the hands of the priests and the other as obstinate as a rock, self-willed and unorthodox. (Neelakantan)

In contrast, Kavita Kane uses a highly personal metaphorical architecture to reconstruct the life of Surpanakha in the *Lanka's Princess*. Surpanakha is recurrently portrayed as an outplaced family member, despite being the part of the immediate family. "She felt ruthlessly bereft: forlorn and alone, her loneliness weaving a cocoon around her including and involving none other"(Kane). Her life, choices and decisions are shown to be frequently divulged by political influence and betrayal in love; encapsulating her position through the metaphor "Life is Exile". After her husband dies, it was as if her life became an endless, purposeless wandering:

She realized she was still walking; she had been walking for days and weeks now; she did not know where. Lanka? Dandak? Or some random shelter in this kingdom? Or her father's ashram? She was not aware even if her father was alive. But she was sure she would not be welcomed at either places. It did not matter anymore, nothing mattered any more. All was over, she had nothing left in her. (Kane)

The metaphor "Life is Exile" refers to a kind of living with a sense of alienation, rootlessness and eternal displacement. Thus, her unfiltered temperament, aggression and animosity seem to be a survival mechanism, rather than an outcome of natural characteristics: "Her resentment was centred around this one person... He had splintered their family... He had separated her from her father"(Kane).

Another metaphor, "Womanhood is wounded" can be applied to the isolated and peculiar life of Surpanakha. The metaphor "Womanhood is wounded" is rooted in the recurrent imagery of emotional scars and mutilation - both metaphorical and literal, which reframes her life as a sequence of wounds caused by patriarchal system. "I have lost all—my husband, my son— all I had was my dignity, and that too was stripped by these two princes from Ayodhya" (Kane).

And lastly, the metaphor "Love is a trap" can be applied to her unrequited love for her husband, who ultimately cheats on her, using her as a pawn in his grand scheme for political war. First, Vidyujiva seduces her, cloaking his flirt as an instrument of love, ultimately seducing her into his trap of conspirative love: "He had eliminated the suspicious, wary Meenakshi...He had seduced the gullible girl into willing collusion, surrendering to him in her mad love"(Kane). The metaphor gives her narrative a tragic finality by portraying all her romantic endeavours as traps that only ended up in betrayals; "She loved him. It just took her a second to realize; and a lifetime to suffer"(Kane).

These metaphorical frameworks clubbed together, fracture the established dichotomy of dharma and adharma. Surpanakha is re-casted as a survivor rather than a seductress, her violence, an outcome of systematic misogyny; Ravana is metamorphosed from a tyrant demon to a struggler, his violence contextualized as reactive resistance. Both the characters are reframed as moral being possessing human flaws and fighting repressive systems, but neither is exonerated of wrong doing. The power of this reframing is thus explained by cognitive linguistics, where readers when exposed to language that garners their empathetic resonance

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with the characters. When readers come across metaphors like “Life as a Battle”, “Life is Exile”, “Love is a trap”, “Womanhood is wounded”, they project their own experiences of displacement and accountability or wounding onto the characters, which thereby weakens their moral judgement.

Ethical Ambiguity and Rewriting of Dharma

Dharma is defined as a universal, unchangeable obligation that is connected to social position and is a part of the bigger cosmic order. The dominant narrative of Ramayana, enshrines Rama as the lord protector of Dharma, an embodiment of putra dharma (filial duty) and raja dharma (kingly duty), while in the other hand it portrays Ravana as an evil perpetrator of both social and divine laws. By portraying dharma as intuitive, conditional and subjective, *Asura* and *Lanka's Princess* challenge and invert the absolutist narrative. These retellings seek to establish that moral legitimacy results from seeing justice as one sees and understand it, not from maintaining inherited norms. According to Surpanakha, dharma is found in self-protection and defending one's individual respect and dignity against political and patriarchal degradation; while for Ravana, dharma is found in upholding and protecting the Asura race and resisting Deva domination.

Asura provides a striking illustration of this change. Traditionally, the abduction of Sita is seen as the final evidence of Ravana's adharma, reinterpreted as retaliation against Surpanakha's mutilation and assertion of supreme political agency in *Asura*. This reframing forces the readers to consider opposing moral arguments, as it reframes the act as tragically rational and morally controversial. Similarly, Ravana's battle against Devas can be seen as a resistance against the caste oppression despite the fact that their high human cost invokes doubt on their moral standing.

Kane's reinterpretation of Surpanakha's love for Lakshman in *Lanka's Princess*, reframed her as a broken women seeking real bond of love and emotion rather than as a lustful demon forcing herself on Lakshman. Thus, the brutality of Lakshman's rejection which ultimately led to the mutilation of Surpanakha has been reinterpreted as symbolic violence intended to silence women who dare to defy the social code of conduct for women. Surpanakha's consequential fury is portrayed as a struggle for dignity and revenge for her loss rather than unjustified retaliation. As both the siblings pursue their own stands of dharma, Surpanakha's conflicts with Ravana, in *Lanka's Princess* portray how Dharma is broken even within familial relationships.

Both novels meld morality and immorality owing to their structural narrative strategies. While Kane takes liberty in giving Surpanakha the intimacy of first-person narration, Neelakantan switches between the viewpoint of Ravana and his soldier Bhadra, maintaining the objectivity of the narration, opposing absolute moral principles. Both writers humanize tragic characters and their follies as human defects, thereby fostering empathy for them, such as Surpanakha's deliberate manipulation or Ravana's political ruthlessness seems as an inevitable human flaw. The humanization of these characters stages morality as relative. Surpanakha's retaliation may seem cruel to Ram and Ravana but is just to her; Ravana's wars may seem unjust to the Devas but was liberating/empowering to the Asura race.

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In both stories, dharma is transformed into a language of protest/resistance against the Brahminical socio-political oppression in *Asura* and against patriarchal stifling in *Lanka's Princess*. This heterodoxy of the narrative resonates with contemporary sensibilities that appraise contextual justice and authenticity over strict adherence to inherited codes. Readers who are exposed to such pluralistic framework are observed to be naturally inclined and favourable to this complexity.

Conclusion:

The critical study of *Asura: Tale of Vanquished* and *Lanka's Princess* show that language acts as tool for ethical reconstruction and reconditioning and is not just a mere language styling tool. In accordance with the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the metaphors used in these texts reorient Ravana and Surpanakha from mythic villains into humans rooted in personal trauma, political agency and human struggles. Their retellings challenge readers' ethics and pushes them to live in moral "grey zones", where they empathise with characters that were perceived to be beyond redemption, breaking down the moral dichotomies of dharma and adharma. Additionally, such linguistic framing revealed mythological fiction as a site of socio-political negotiations. These retelling foreground significant contemporary issues such as caste mobility, gender rights, and regional identity politics. By highlighting the underrepresented areas/issues and challenging the traditional portrayal of heroic ethos of Ramayana, Neelakantan and Kane write against the grain defying hegemonic dominant narrative. These reinterpretations provide space for interactive discussions that transform myth into a dynamic, cultural artefact by extending the texts' life beyond the printed pages of the book. According to the study's findings, deliberate linguistic and narrative strategies by Kane and Neelakantan reorient readers' ethical and moral consciousness while modernising traditional epics. The reinterpretation of Ravana and Surpanakha in these retellings demonstrates how language can subvert traditional and cultural beliefs and transform myth into a tool for social criticism. The study of vernacular and non-vernacular English retellings to show linguistic diversity and its implication in the ethical reception of readers can be subject for future studies. The adaptability of mythological retellings lies in their lasting relevance; as they hold the power to both preserve and reframe collective cultural memory with aspirations and values of the contemporary world. Ancient myths continue to be used by modern writers and readers as grounds for cultural negotiation, influencing the moral and ethical boundaries of a globalised and technologically connected audience rather than being a mere artefact of an absolute past.

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