

From Archetype to Agency: Women in the Mythological Revisions of Anand Neelakantan

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of female characters in the mythological retellings of Anand Neelakantan, particularly in *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*, *Ajaya: Rise of Kali*, and *Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara*. It focuses on the ways in which women are reimagined as socially situated, emotionally complex, and morally layered figures rather than as fixed mythic archetypes. Drawing upon feminist and poststructuralist frameworks, especially the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the paper argues that Neelakantan's women negotiate power through silence, resistance, care, memory, and ethical choice. In particular, Sita in *Asura* emerges not as a fully self-speaking subject but as a figure whose presence is filtered through Ravana's gaze, making her silence itself an important critical site. Neelakantan's retellings do not simply modernize myth; they expose the pressures that shape women's lives within patriarchal and political systems.

Keywords: Anand Neelakantan; Mythological Retellings; Female Agency; Subalternity; Gender Performativity; Feminist Criticism

I. Introduction

Contemporary Indian mythological fiction has increasingly moved away from straightforward retelling and toward the recovery of overlooked perspectives. Writers such as Anand Neelakantan have become important in this shift because they retell familiar stories from the viewpoint of the defeated, the forgotten, and the socially marginalized. While much critical discussion has focused on his male anti-heroes; his female characters are equally significant and deserve focused attention.

Traditional versions of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* often confine women to roles defined by sacrifice, devotion, moral purity, or suffering. Neelakantan complicates this framework by presenting women as thinking individuals who respond to social pressure in different ways. Some resist directly, some endure quietly, and some act within limited spaces of influence. This variety is important because it shows that agency is not always loud or heroic; sometimes it is indirect, fragile, or strategic.

A particularly important case is Sita in *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*. If read from the perspective of Ravana's narration, Sita is not given an independent voice in the direct sense. She is seen, interpreted, and emotionally framed through Ravana's consciousness. This means that her identity is not fully self-articulated but mediated by another subject's gaze. Such a reading makes her silence more significant, because it highlights how women in mythological narratives are often present as objects of vision rather than as speaking subjects. Using the ideas of Beauvoir, Butler, and Spivak, this paper reads Neelakantan's women as figures moving from archetype to agency, though not always through direct speech or complete freedom.

Sita, Mediation, and Silenced Presence

Sita's representation in *Asura* is especially revealing because her presence is not built through her own direct narration. Instead, the reader encounters her through Ravana's perspective, and this changes how her character functions in the text. She becomes a figure of emotional and symbolic importance, but not a fully autonomous speaking subject. This narrative choice matters because it reflects the larger structure of patriarchal storytelling, where women are often observed, desired, protected, interpreted, or mourned rather than allowed to define themselves.

This is where Spivak's question of whether the subaltern can speak becomes useful. Sita's silence is not simply an absence; it is a condition shaped by narrative mediation. She is present, but her presence is filtered through another consciousness. Her identity therefore becomes relational, not self-generated. The effect is subtle but powerful: the reader is made aware that women's voices are often received through masculine frames, even in retellings that claim to challenge canon.

At the same time, this mediated presence does not make Sita unimportant. On the contrary, it gives her a complicated kind of force. She becomes a site of longing, conflict, and ethical reflection. Her silence draws attention to the limits of representation itself. In that sense, Neelakantan's Sita is not a simple feminist recovery of voice but a critique of the conditions under which women are made visible in epic tradition.

Mandodari and the Limits of Wisdom

Mandodari in *Asura* is one of the most thoughtful female figures in Neelakantan's work. She is intelligent, morally perceptive, and capable of seeing the consequences of Ravana's actions. Yet her wisdom does not translate into power. She recognizes injustice, but she cannot alter the course of events. This makes her a useful example of Beauvoir's argument that woman is often positioned as the **Other**: present, necessary, and deeply aware, but not granted equal authority.

Mandodari's tragedy lies in the fact that insight alone does not produce agency. She understands more than many around her, but her understanding remains trapped within a patriarchal structure that privileges male decision-making. Her character therefore reveals that women in mythological narratives may possess ethical clarity while still remaining politically limited.

Together, Sita and Mandodari show that Neelakantan does not treat women as decorative figures in epic history. Instead, he gives them emotional seriousness and symbolic weight, even when their influence remains constrained. Their importance lies in how they expose the cost of male ambition and the silence that patriarchy often imposes on women.

Draupadi and Resistance

Draupadi in *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* and *Ajaya: Rise of Kali* is one of Neelakantan's most forceful female characters. She is not presented as passive or purely victimized. Instead, she appears proud, aware, emotionally intense, and politically alert. Her anger is not treated as a flaw to be corrected; it is a response to injustice. This makes her a more active force in the epic world than many traditional portrayals allow.

From Judith Butler's perspective, Draupadi can be read as a figure who unsettles prescribed gender behaviour. She does not perform idealized femininity in the submissive sense often expected of women in patriarchal storytelling. Her speech, indignation, and refusal to remain quiet challenge the expectation that a woman should accept humiliation with patience. In this way, Neelakantan turns the dice hall episode into more than a moment of personal suffering; it becomes a revelation of structural inequality.

What makes Draupadi compelling is that her resistance does not erase vulnerability. She remains wounded by the events around her, but the narrative does not reduce her to that wound. Instead, it allows her pride, intelligence, and emotional force to coexist. This complexity is one of the strongest features of Neelakantan's mythological revision.

Kunti, Gandhari, and Bhanumati

The women in the *Ajaya* series widen the field of agency further by showing different modes of ethical and emotional response. Kunti is especially important because her life is shaped by secrecy, duty, and moral conflict. Her abandonment of Karna cannot be read in a simple moral frame. It reflects a painful conflict between social constraint and maternal feeling. In Beauvoir's terms, her life shows how women's choices are often narrowed by the conditions under which they live.

Gandhari is another deeply layered figure. Her blindfold is usually read as an act of devotion, but Neelakantan's treatment suggests something more complex. It may also be seen as protest, burden, or withdrawal. She sees injustice, yet her awareness does not lead to transformation. This is where her character becomes tragic. She is not ignorant; she is constrained. Her silence therefore reflects not innocence but the limitations of her position.

Bhanumati, though less prominent in many conventional retellings, is significant because she represents quiet endurance and relational intelligence. Her presence reminds the reader that power is not always public or political. Sometimes it lies in maintaining stability, reading situations carefully, and holding together fragile human relationships. Through this lens, her care is not passive; it is a form of labour that supports the social world around her.

Tara and Pragmatic Agency

In *Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara*, Tara emerges as one of Neelakantan's most striking female characters. She is not defined by purity or ideal femininity. Instead, she is intelligent, pragmatic, and fully aware of the unstable world around her. She must constantly negotiate violence, loyalty, desire, and political uncertainty.

Tara is especially interesting because she does not fit into a fixed moral category. She cannot be reduced to either victim or rebel. Her identity is fluid, and her actions are shaped by circumstance as much as by conviction. This makes her a strong example of Butler's theory of performativity, since her femininity is not a natural essence but something continually enacted in response to changing conditions.

At the same time, Tara also reflects Beauvoir's insight that womanhood is lived within limits set by social structures. Her intelligence does not remove those limits, but it allows her to move through them with clarity. That pragmatism is itself a form of agency.

Themes of Agency

Across Neelakantan's mythological retellings, female agency appears in several forms rather than one single pattern. Some women speak directly; others communicate through silence. Some resist power openly; others survive by negotiation. Some carry ethical weight through decision-making, while others exercise influence through emotional labour and relational insight. This diversity is one of the most important strengths of Neelakantan's writing.

Seen through Spivak, these women reveal how difficult it is for marginalized figures to be fully heard within dominant narratives. Yet Neelakantan still makes space for them to exist as more than symbols. Through Beauvoir, we can see how their lives are shaped by structures that define them in relation to men. Through Butler, we can understand how their gender roles are performed, adjusted, and sometimes resisted. Together, these frameworks help show that agency in Neelakantan is not absolute freedom but lived negotiation.

This is why his women matter. They are not idealized heroines in the conventional sense, but neither are they merely passive victims. They occupy the unstable space between submission and resistance, which makes them more realistic and more human.

II. Conclusion

Anand Neelakantan's mythological retellings offer an important reconsideration of women in epic tradition. By moving away from simple archetypes, he presents female characters as morally complex, emotionally aware, and socially constrained individuals. Sita, Mandodari, Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Bhanumati, and Tara together form a broad spectrum of feminine experience within mythic storytelling.

Sita's case is especially significant because she is not fully allowed to speak in her own voice; instead, she is mediated through Ravana's perspective. This makes her silence not a weakness but a critical feature of the text. It reminds readers that women in myth are often seen before they are heard. Neelakantan's retellings do not completely solve this problem, but they do expose it with remarkable clarity.

These women do not all resist in the same way, and that is precisely what makes the retellings valuable. Some voice dissent, some endure, some act strategically, and some remain tragically limited by the world around them. Neelakantan's strength lies in showing that agency is not always visible in dramatic rebellion; it can also appear in care, awareness, silence, and survival. In this sense, his works contribute meaningfully to feminist and cultural criticism. They do not simply modernize the epics; they reopen them to questions about power, gender, and identity.

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