

## RECONCEPTUALIZING THE MYTHOLOGICAL IMAGE OF RAVANA IN SHARAD TANDALE'S NOVEL *RAVANA: THE KING OF RAKSHASAS*

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### Abstract

The researcher through the present research paper aims to analyze Sharad Tandale's novel *Ravana: The King of Rakshasas* (2019). Tandale reinvestigates Ravana, as an important mythological figure, from literary classic book *Ramayana*. The select novel for the study is a biography of Ravana written from his own point of view wherein he never bothers about his being 'half-breed'. The present paper is divided into three parts. The first part offers an explanatory introduction to the present study. The second part reconceptualizes Sharad Tandale's novel *Ravana: The King of Rakshasas* under the set theoretical framework and the last part of the present study foregrounds the research findings.

### Keywords

*Half-breeds, Sharad Tandale, Ravana, Myth, Culture, Mythological fiction, etc.*

### Full Article

#### **Introduction:**

"An interest in the past was one of the distinguishing characteristics of humans as compared with the other animals" (Henry of Huntington).

"Myth is the foundation of life; it is the timeless pattern, the religious formula to which life shapes itself..." (Mann, 1936)

It is well understood that myths and folklore lay the foundation for any culture, and based on it, we can understand the significance and characteristics of that society or civilization. According to *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* myth is defined as 'a story from ancient times, especially one that was told to explain natural events or to describe the early history of a people'. Some of myths significantly addressed in the 'World culture' are *Ancient Greek Myths* and a *creation myth* that explains how the world began. Myths are generally engrossed with supernatural elements. On the other hand, mythology as referred to in *Merriam Webster Dictionary* is 'a branch of knowledge that deals with myth'. It is observed that 'World cultures' such as Western culture, Eastern culture, Latin culture, Middle Eastern culture, and African culture are enriched with different myths deeply rooted in the annals of that civilization or community.



The relationship between myth and literature has been transforming in various forms and capacities. The connection between ‘Myth and Literature’ investigates the foundation of World Literature in myths. Thus, it can be argued that ‘Myth’ serves an unavoidable part in the formation of any civilization’s oral and written literature. The western literature and culture largely seek its roots in Ancient Greek Mythology which has a plethora of classic stories. These stories have embellished English language with numerous words and phrases and contributed to the diction of English language. Some of the well-established myths found in mainstream English literature are Sisypheus, Echo and Narcissus, Orpheus and Eurydice, Prometheus etc.

In the classical period of Greek literature, Homer, an Ancient Greek poet has been a pioneer in exploring myths in his well-known epics *Iliad* and *the Odyssey*. In Myth, Poetry, and Critical Theory, Lillian Feder draws the inter-connection of myth and literature. In *Literary Criticism and Myth*, Lillian Feder brings out the connection between myth and literature. Myths are used in literature in three major ways such as mythical, narratives, and figures. On the basis the plot and character are created; or they are submerged beneath the surface of realistic characters and action; or new mythical structures are invented that have a remarkable resemblance to traditional ones. It is essential to know that culture could be roughly defined as “the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts.” It is obvious that myths form a strong foundation of any culture that reconstructs society.

Indian culture is a supreme and well-regarded establishment, which is one of the world’s oldest civilizations. This Indian civilization in general and Indus Valley Civilization in particular has been into existence for more than 4,500 years ago. In the cultural scenario of India, myths and mythologies have been shaping the core of the collective consciousness of Indian people. Indian folklores are rich in myths and serves as a treasure for mythological fictions. The rosy condition of myths in Indian folklores have later seen to be percolated as an influencing and impacting historical backdrop for pre-and post-Independence Indian English Literature produced so far. Consequently, the writers, writing in Indian English Literature, contemplate various stories and their thematic backgrounds available in different Scriptures and Puranas.

One of the significant writers and scholars on mythological fiction, Meenu Dubey while stating her standpoints on myth asserts that Indian writers are deeply associated with the Indian Mythologies because they know how these myths have shaped the collective consciousness, culture, and the rich past of the country for the last thousands of years. It is quite remarkable to know that many Indian children still grow up absorbing the myths and legends of the country.

Myths play a huge impact in the Indian freedom movement where Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and Gandhiji frequently referred the ancient manuscript of *Bhagavad Gita*. Similarly, Indian myths have frequently been an incredible asset of fiction for scholars like A. K. Ramanujan, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, and modern writers like Shashi Tharoor, Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanaik, Kavita Kane, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and so forth. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* stands apart as an ideal illustration of the combination of fantasy and fiction, where Britishers represent the evil characteristics of Ravana and Gandhi as the heavenly figure of Ram.

In the legacy of the writers contributing to mythological fiction in India, we can add Sharad Tandale, whose Marathi novel translated into English, i.e., current research paper entitled *Ravana: The King of Rakshasas* (2019). In the Western culture the Bible has been a source of myths for many well-known English writers. In the Eastern culture, the myths associated with Ravana, one of the main figures in the epic ‘Ramayana’, have been well addressed and deeply





rooted in the different genres of Indian writing in English. The novel selected for the present research is published in 2019 (English translation). It can be revisited from a postmodern perspective which is basically a socio-cultural and literary theory that has been reinvestigating social sciences, art, architecture, history, literature, myths, politics etc.

Postmodern Literature often reconceptualizes mythological, historical and political issues which dismantles the role of history, culture, and politics as grand narratives and foregrounds their falsehoods and incomplete truths. In the light of this argument, it is crucial to note that besides postmodern English literature, many postmodern Marathi novels translated into English aim to reinterpret various mythological, historical and political figures innovatively by digging up the past to showcase their hitherto suppressed / oppressed / indigenous tribal voices. Such novels problematize the notions of history, historiography, nationality, racism, and identity by employing the literary devices such as self-reflexivity, metafiction, unreliable narrator, inter-textuality, and parody.

### **Sharad Tandale's novel *Ravana: The King of Rakshasas* (2019):**

The Indian literature, culture, and readers have been enriched by two mythological epics that are *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita* and the *Ramayana*. These epics are generally written chronicles of events that happened approximately five thousand years ago. There may be hardly a few Indians who might have not read or heard anything about these two epics ever. It is viewed that *Valmiki Ramayana* is very inspiring and energizing in Indian culture. It has been translated into many regional and local languages not only in India but across Asia. This is the characteristic and specialty of this epic. Today, there are approximately more than three hundred versions of the *Ramayana* available all over the world. We conceptualize Narada's version as the earliest of these. Therefore, the plot of most of the works written and performed on *Ramayana* so far; revolves around Valmiki's *Ramayana*. The general plot of the *Ramayana* follows the theme of Rama as a supremely masculine and ideal person and King Ravana as evil, arrogant, and vicious. We hear, read, and even see that Rama was virtuous, wise, a wife-vow, while Ravana was learned, mighty, but negative and hasty. References to such historical events and personalities are transmitted from one generation to another through historical documents, myths, and novels. Many sages and historians have commented in their own way about Rama and Ravana as important characters who deliver and attribute the philosophy of life to Indian culture.

The devout, ascetic, learned, mighty Ravana was destroyed by his immortality and evil mind. Even with the passage of years and ages, people's perception of the historical character Ravana has not changed much. But as time changed, the number of speakers and writers on *Ramayana* and its important characters like Ram and Ravana increased. Scholars and writers like Tandale have studied the mythological character Ravana from different perspectives and re-arranged him in a new historical context. It has brought hitherto suppressed realities about Ravana into limelight. Such a critical study of mythological literature based on an interesting character like him enriches the reader and broadens their vistas of existing knowledge about Ravana.

The present research paper examines the novel *Ravana: The King of Rakshasas* written by a new generation author Sharad Tandale. An engineer by profession, he has received the 'YBI Young Entrepreneur of the Year 2013' award. His journey in the writing world started with the book *Ravana: The King of Rakshasas*. The novel is about four hundred thirty-two pages long and is a monologue/characteristic of Ravana, the central character of the novel. From the very first page to the last page, he is seen interacting with the readers and presenting his story and the underlying pain in it. Ravana, the demon king, plays an important role in the



ancient Indian epic, the Ramayana as an antagonist. He is defamed in the Ramayana for kidnapping Sita, Lord Rama's wife.

However, Tandale has portrayed many positive insights into Ravana's personality. Ravana answers firmly to his critics that he had great ambition, strong will, confidence, courage, strength, and righteousness. With his strength, he was able to establish his existence and the empire of Rakshasa culture in the world. He was the inventor of Chess, Rudra Veena, Ravan Sanhita, Kumar Tantra, as well as Shiv Tandav Stotra. Regarding Ravana, even today, we feel the train of many mysterious things in our mind. Like did Ravana have ten mouths? Was Ravana's Lanka made of gold? Did Ravana possess Pushpak Viman? Was Ravana cruel? But in his book, *Ravana* by Sharad Tandale, we get scientific and research-based answers, in which nowhere the author seems to be advocating magic, tantra-mantras, or mystical lore.

The positive aspects of Ravana's character have been revealed to the readers very well. In this novel, Ravana is the founder of Rakshasa civilization who unites Daityas, Demons, Asuras and many nomadic tribes. Ravana's rebellion is a fight against injustice, oppression, and exploiters at a very young age to create self-existence, prove oneself and win over the established God empire. The first thing Ravana must face is his being a 'half-breed' i.e. hybrid in origin. In other words, 'half-breed' can be defined as anyone who is of mixed blood due to the parents belonging to the different race. Here, different races stand for different biological origins. In the history of the world there are numerous aboriginal peoples such as American Indians, Canadian indigenous people, British Columbians, Indians, Negros, Mexicans, Chinese, Anglo-Indians etc. These multiracial people who are of more than one ethnicity are labelled as 'half-breeds'. It is basically a historic term which sees its root in *hybridity*. However, its implications can be seen from the period of *Ramayana* itself.

Ravana's father was Maharshi Vishrava, and his mother was an Arya, thus, the stigma of being a hybrid did not allow him to rest. He harbors the highest ambition to establish an empire in the Triloka by erasing the stain of having joined hands with the gods that interfered with his own and mother's existence. Ravana stands before us as the best mother devoted, one who has a great ambition to do anything for his mother, clan, and ancestors by challenging any difficulties. Ravana, who has great love for his siblings, stands as a capable and accomplished king for all. One who does not hesitate to sacrifice his life to create an empire of demonic civilization. As Ravana is skilled in warfare, weapons, and science, he is also a high-ranking Shiva devotee. The Shiv Tandava Stotra composed by him is still popular today. He is not only a fighter, brave, mighty, politician but also smart, loving, and tender in nature to his siblings.

It was no simple matter to gather all the nomadic tribes and win against the established God Empire. So, this novel is an account to see how Ravana's sacrifice, dedication, organizational skills, hard work, communication skills, and logic let him succeed in establishing *Rakshasas* culture. The abduction of Sita is believed to be Ravana's most reckless and destructive act. Ravana dislikes Ram and Lakshmana's insulting of Shurpankha. He was not a misogynist, but he did not forget to take revenge on those who exploited women of the Rakshasa culture. He believed in the equality of men and women. Ravana's views on women are progressive in nature. Therefore, he entrusts the protection of Lanka to the woman Lankini, moreover, he incorporates Tratika the female demon Rakshasini into his empire. From which he explains his feeling of equality towards women.

Ravana in this novel also does not like the fact that people vilify him and spread the wrong impression that he had ten mouths. But it is certain that he had the intelligence of ten learned men. Even though Ravana is arrogant, he eventually regrets that none of his relatives and friends survives to enjoy the happiness of the empire for which he fought all his life. The city of Rome was not built in a day, but many years were spent for it, just like the Lankan empire and





the demonic culture built by Ravana on his own efforts, was also a gift received through many hardships, injustice, suffering, war, death, and financial loss.

In this novel, the author portrays Ravana as a great hero, which we need to study separately without connecting it with the stereotypical character of Ravana presented in *Ramayana*. Ravana's acquisition of knowledge in adolescence, before establishing the empire of the Rakshasa civilization, is also an example of struggle, sacrifice, and dedication. His staying away for learning from childhood friends, close relatives, and companions in the Gurukula keeps Ravana away from his family for some time. Ravana was no ordinary king but the great hero of the Rakshasa Empire, a devotee of Mahadev and a mighty disciple of Brahma. Through Brahma, Ravana acquires knowledge of history, logic, psychology, innovation, music and Ayurveda. People comment that Ravana was arrogant and think that it was arrogance that led to his end, but Ravana in this novel tells the readers:

I think over the things we learn and present a new perspective, this hurts their prejudices. So as to feel superior, they term me arrogant, to hide their incompetence. If they find satisfaction in deeming me arrogant, someone who is not an intellectual slave, then so be it. Arrogance is born of ignorance. The one who truly learns becomes rebellious, not arrogant. If someone says such a thing to you again, tell them, 'Dashgriv might be arrogant, but is not a slave of beliefs. He is a mixed- blood, but He refuses to be hapless (Tandale, 101).

Even in the case of the great churning of the sea, which is presented in mythological stories, Ravana expresses his viewpoints in a very detailed way. On the delusion that the gods are immortal because by consuming the Amrut, he comments: "The one who is born must also die and that is the law of nature applicable to every living thing, equally." (Tandale, 105).

Ravana questions several beliefs; and through his strong intelligence, sometimes he used to put Guru Brahma in trouble and ask some questions, which even Brahma was unable to answer. That is why he was well-known among his teachers, mothers, relatives, siblings, rulers of foreign states and even among his enemies.

Ravana in this novel is the father of Neo-Rakshasa culture. He is the cry, which represents all the unstable and restless nomadic tribes who stands for the supreme example of how even a half-breed can become a king through struggle. Although Ravana was born as a hybrid, he did not lose but fought against his own circumstances. He gained knowledge, gave stability to the afflicted, built an empire of common people and took revenge. Ravana is still seen as the best fighting devotee of Mahadev.

Author Sharad Tandale has added some other characters along with Ravana who promotes modern and progressive ideas. Ravana's sister Kumbhinasi was also capable of clear thinking and taking her own decisions. She reprimands Ravana for infringing on her personal rights and makes it clear that she has complete freedom as to whom she should marry. Kumbhinasi dislikes Ravana's interference in her marriage decision. Today's young generation has also become followers of Kumbhinasi's thoughts which are eye opening.

Ravana's fight shifts from the Rakshasa kingdom to the Rakshasa Empire. He deals with the Gods with the 'tit for tat' strategy and completes his revenge. He never misses an opportunity to physical/mental abuse and denigrate the women of the Gods and Aryas who physically, mentally, and emotionally abused his mothers and aunts. But he does not deny the femininity of women in weak elements like asuras, demons, and snakes etc. Hearing the fame of Ravana's competence, many kings and emperors of the time joined his Rakshasa culture,



implying that a person's worth and superiority is not determined by his clan but by his karma. Ravana is a scientific thinker who does not believe in Heaven, Hell, Yama, and Rebirth. For him material and physical happiness is the means of attaining salvation. Moksha after death has no place in Ravana's ideology. Ravana denies the existence of Lord Vishnu. Because according to him only Mahadev is the creator and protector of creation. He believes that Vishnu is a fictitious person created to frighten the Anaryas. Through Ravana's character we can learn that even a great success can be ruined by a big careless mistake. It also reflects that blind faith and love towards one's own and loved ones can lead to one's destruction. Therefore, one should not recognize or doubt the ability of the enemy from his/her outward appearance and should not underestimate him. If we want to understand Ravana that the author intended, then we must treat Ravana as an independent character. After reading *Ravana: The King of Rakshasas*, the reader will decide whether Ravana was a villain or not.

### Conclusion:

To conclude, the abducting of Sita and war with Rama were Ravana's biggest reckless mistakes that led to his tragic end i.e., his death and Ravana's kingdom was ruined. This unforgivable crime of Ravana will not be erased by any merit. He settled down in history as a villain. It can be concluded that there are multifaceted shades of the character of Ravana as of Ram. Writer Sharad Tandale's Ravana is different from the Ravana character drawn by other writers. In this novel we see Ravana inspired by a new thought. Probably, Ravana we have come across in myths, so far, be it oral or written is a negative character. However, this novel helps to some extent to change our negative view of Ravana and offers us an opportunity to appreciate his multifaceted character without prejudice and bias. Ravana in this novel represents the displaced class who had been fighting to establish their identity in contemporary society. The way we look at something is how we experience it. There are many individuals with multiple standpoints by which they look at Ravana. With the ideology we look at him, Ravana stands before us.

One thing this novel demonstrates is that it's not logical or even judicial to form an opinion about a person or a myth based only on available literary works. Therefore, while studying mythological figures like *Ravana*, one should freely and unhesitatingly consider the pros and cons of different information that comes forward and register one's opinions. This novel does not even suggest that we should accept Ravana's mistakes and think of him as a great hero or even a gentleman. But by focusing the reader's attention on many of Ravana's strengths, it aims to reset and reconstruct the image of Ravana. He gives a message that even though it is not in our hands where we are born, we can succeed through our actions. Dnyanpeeth Award winner literary Dr. Bhalchandra Nemade has recently opined that "not a single *Ramayana* can be said to be true". By highlighting Nemade's quote, we can state that 'not even one version of Ravana can be called true'.

Therefore, if the journey of *researching and reconceptualizing Ravana* started by the writers of today's generation like Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Patnaik, Anand Neelkantan, and Sharad Tandale continues, then the readers would get to see various aspects of Ravana's personality. Thus, it can be concluded that Modern Indian English Literature (translated from Marathi to English) written by the authors like Sharad Tandale deals with mythology wherein he delves into the mystery and psyche of readers through the multiplicity of dimensions. In contemporary mythological novels, writers elaborate epics in a less godly and more humanistic way.

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