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Ravana as a tragic hero in asura the tale of vanquished

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Abstract

Asura Tale of Vanquished is a brave attempt and worthy of attention, written from the perspective of Ravana, by Anand Neelkantan. Majorly the fiction follows the version of Sanghadasa's Jain Ramayana and Adbhut Ramayana. The story of Ramayana has been told innumerable times from the perspective of Rama but the author came up with his unique style of narration. In Asian countries, Ramayana has thousands of versions of its own kind and unique style to tell. In a brave attempt, the author portrayed the character of Ravana in a unique and glorified manner breaking the stereotypical images of the character. The novel provides a vanquished voice of a tragic hero who speaks for his family and people. The character of Ravana is progressive throughout the novel he is introduced as a brave, courageous, a man full of ambition and a tragic hero who ultimately leads to downfall because of his misfortune. Aristotle developed the concept of 'Tragic Hero'. According to him, a character should have the qualities of noble and heroic traits but a fatal flaw that leads him to ultimate downfall. He established the concept of *catharsis* and *anagnorisis* too for the formation of 'Perfect Tragic Hero'. The purpose of the paper is to study the character of Ravana in the light features of a tragic hero given by Aristotle.

Keywords: Asura, stereotypical images, vanquished voice, tragic hero, fatal flaw etc.

Introduction

In Hindu mythology, Ravana has been portrayed as a demon or a rakshasa. He is considered to be the child of Brahmin sage Vishrava and a demon princess Kaiakesi. It is believed that Brahmin sage Vishrava once married to a rakshasa princess Kaiakesi who bore Ravana, Vibhisana and Kumbhakaran as sons and Surpanakha as a daughter. Some of the characters who were portrayed as villains in the stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata, had many heroic traits. Ravana is one of them. He had many qualities - scholar of Vedas, an architect, a musician, devotee of Shiva, faithful husband and a good king but a single tragic flaw in his character brought about his downfall.

According to Hindu mythology, Ravana is considered as Dasmukha or Ten faced. His ten faces symbolize his evil nature in the Hindu epic that is why on the day of Dussehra his effigies are burnt to celebrate the victory of good over evil. In the novel Asura as it follows the Jain version of Ramayana, Ravana's ten faces depict the nature of a common man that every common man has. Ravana in the novel justifies the value of each face that represents basic emotions of a man.

According to Asura

"Mythology thus portrays Ravana as Dasmukha or Ten faced one while his twenty hands denote his prowess and power. Ravana see himself as the epitome of a complete human being...so Rama may be seen as God but Ravana is more complete man."

In the novel Asura, Ravana's struggles in childhood and his unconditional fatherly love for Sita are beautifully explained. In spite of belonging to a casteless society, Asura Ravana never submitted himself to Devas. He had high ambitions in his mind to conquer the entire world.

"The fire of hunger would never quench the flames of ambitions the palace ignited in me. I knew then that the world he owned and much beyond, would be mine and mine alone. I believe there is a world out there to conquer. A better world awaiting us."

(Asura Tale of the Vanquished)

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Aristotalian concept of Tragic Hero

According to Aristotle's *Poetics* Tragic hero is a character of high noble status and has greatness who enjoys prosperity and renown but ultimately he is found in adversity and sufferings. The tragic hero has a fatal flaw, usually excessive pride known as HUBRIS, that leads him towards ultimate downfall. The tragic hero is snared by his own greatness; extraordinary competence, passion for duty, the arrogance is usually connected with his greatness (Wikipedia).

Aristotle's *Poetics* defines a tragic hero as

"An intermediate kind of personage, not pre-eminently virtuous and just" whose misfortune is attributed, not to vice or depravity, but an error of judgment. The hero is fittingly described as good in spite of an infirmity of character".

Tragic heroes do not always deal with the deeds of the protagonist but sometimes in a few cases, Antagonists may even be defined as tragic heroes. Aristotle believed that a tragedy must evoke feelings of fear and pity in the audience. These are the fundamental emotions to experience *catharsis*. Aristotle defines *catharsis* as

"Pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves"

According to Aristotle, a tragic hero must have the qualities of Goodness, Appropriateness, Likeness and Consistency. The character should represent a kind of goodness. He should be appropriate. If he is a male, he should represent a manly attitude. The character should be real and true to nature. The character should be consistent throughout. A tragic hero commits a mistake and wrongs without any evil intentions that is why he remains ultimately a hero and does not degenerate into a villain even though he is found against the path of morality.

Ravana as a tragic hero

Ravana has been portrayed in a negative light in Valmiki's version of Ramayana. Valmiki's Ramayana is written from the theological perspective where Rama is the central character of the story. The character of Ravana has been heightened to glorify Rama as a heroic figure. Valmiki's version of Ramayana is believed to be the fundamental version of all Ramayana. Kamban's portrayal of Ravana's caricature is much different from Valmiki's. Ravana is much glorified in the southern version of Ramayana. Ravana is worshiped as a God by the people of Lanka. He was the hero of Lanka who pleased Lord Shiva. Anand Neelkantan's story of Asura follows the versions of Kamban's and Sanghadasa's Jain version of Ramayana. Representation of Ravana is depicted as a Demon figure in Hindu mythology whereas some versions depict him as a great scholar of Vedas.

In the novel *Asura*, the author painted him as a tragic hero who fulfills all the requirements a tragic hero needs. Ravana becomes a tragic hero, of his blind faith in brothers and powers. As a tragic hero must be from the noble family, according to Aristotle, Ravana was the child of Brahmin sage Vishrava and Demon princess Kaekesi. Ravana belongs to a noble family. He holds a higher position in

Asura society. He holds noble ideas and ambitions. He serves his duty with sincerity to his people without any selfish intent. He is a well-known warrior for his fearless heart.

The book starts with 'The End'. Ravana is laid down in the battlefield where he mourns over what Devas have done to him and his people. He falls from his positions to disgrace by kidnapping her own daughter, Sita. The author gives Ravana the voice of human emotions and feelings in such a manner that touches the readers to evoke pity and fear for the character.

"I could not save my people from these two warriors and their monkey men. I have worked hard and fought with the Gods and their chosen men"

Aristotle developed the idea that feeling of pity for a tragic hero arises when he is met by an undeserving misfortune. A tragic hero's misfortune is not entirely deserved. Ravana does not deserve to die as a result of the incident of knowing the prophecy regarding his own destruction. An astrologer's prediction that his own daughter will bring destruction to Asuras fears Ravana. He wanted his daughter at any cost in spite of the prophecy. He faced poverty and struggle in his childhood. As a father, his duty was to fulfill the wishes of his daughter instead of leaving her in the forest. When he becomes a king, he begins as a good man, a good master, a good brother, a good husband and a good father. He becomes a person of greatness. Author's aim of creating a character with a tragic flaw is to generate particular feelings in the audience for the character. This response of the audience is called *catharsis*.

"An astrologer, who claimed to be my father's friend came to the palace, looked at my daughter and proclaimed in front of everyone that she would bring destruction to the Asuras. From the day onwards, all my family members, the palace servants, and my ministers began to behave in a strange fashion. But I could feel the hatred and fear they felt for her. I feared for her life".

(Asura Tale of The Vanquished)

India is a country where different cultures and traditions co-exist peacefully. There are various mythologies that exist in different cultures. Each mythology has its own heritage and tradition with many festivals. On Dussehra or Vijaydashmi, there are fewer heard places like Mandor (Rajasthan), Mandasaur (M.P) and specially Bistrakh (Greater Noida) where Ravana is worshiped. According to the natives of Bistrakh, it is believed that Ravana was born there and spent his childhood. His father Visharava was native of the place. Ravana along with his father worshiped the linga of Shiva. They believe him as a tragic hero. On the day of Diwali or Dussehra, he is worshiped not Lord Rama.

Ravana's fatal flaw

The term hamartia is associated with Greek tragedy. It is also defined as a tragic flaw or tragic error or fatal flaw. 'Tragic flaw' is the concept of Greek drama. The term is described as flaws or mistakes of a character that leads him towards downfall or decay. Aristotle defines hamartia as the quality of a tragic hero:

"...The character between these two extremes – that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty".

Hamartia is defined as a powerful device in which a story begins with a rich and powerful hero who then falls into misfortune by a mistake. Sympathetic level of the audience takes place for the character who comes across the serious disaster. It is considered that the error committed by a character is not intentionally but a mistake that grows the feeling of pity for the character. The mistake leads the character from good fortune to bad fortune.

What is interesting in the Jain Ramayana is Ravana's fall despite his various virtues and conquests. He is not only aware of his one grave mistake (the abduction of Sita) but also brave enough to fight in a battle where his own defeat is inevitable. Some versions claim that Sita was actually his daughter and that he only abducted her to save her from the hardships and perils of exile.

(A Tragic Hero: Portrayal of Ravana in the Jain Tradition)

In Hindu mythology, abduction of Sita can be considered the fatal flaw or error of the character Ravana. That could be defined as *hamartia* but in the book *Asura*, as a matter of different perspective, Ravana's intention is slightly different than of Valmiki's. He wants to attack the kingdom of Janaka to bring his own child back home. He doesn't let Sita live in uncivilized culture of Devas where women are kept in veils. Their emotions, feelings, dreams and wishes are not valued. His curiosity for his daughter, that she is alive and over ambitious attitude to attack Devas, can be defined as his tragic error in the novel.

"For a fleeting moment I was happy. My daughter was alive. But she was now a princess of the enemy. A new energy rushed through me. I would assemble my army and march to the kingdom of Janaka. I would crush his army, plunder his kingdom and reclaim my daughter. She was an Asura princess and no Deva king could take her away from me...she was the daughter of the most powerful Emperor on earth. If I ever found that the man was not worthy of her, I would whisk her away to my palace, my bosom, and protect her from all harm"

Ravana lives as a good king to his subjects. He belongs to the elite class of Asura caste. The prophecy (Sita's birth would be the destruction of Ravana) of an astrologer turns his attitude towards life. In spite of knowing the fact, his ambitions to get Sita increases day by day. The prophecy can be defined as *peripeteia* (a sudden reversal of fortune). Thus in the novel *Asura Tale of the Vanquished*, Ravana becomes the victim of *hamartia*. The abduction of his own daughter leads him towards destruction.

Conclusion

Ravana, in the book *Asura*, is given human voice and emotions to express his pains and sufferings. He is painted as representative of Asura who wants to live with his burning ambitions and a grand dream. He faces some difficulties in his childhood but ultimately with the help of Asura people and ministers he kicks out the Kubera and becomes the king of Lanka. As it is suggested by Aristotle,

he fulfills the first requirement of nobility. As the novel progresses the reader comes to know that Sita is portrayed as the daughter of Ravana. Ravana's love for Sita is portrayed as unconditional fatherly love. The author describes Ravana's personality as an ambitious person who at any cost wants his daughter as an Asura princess. Unlike Hindu mythology, Ravana has lust for Sita but, according to the novel, Ravana's stubbornness for his daughter becomes his reason for destruction. In conclusion, Ravana can be described as a "tragic hero" because he possesses the characteristics that are required by Aristotle. Ravana is of nobility, is good, though not perfect, experiences a downfall that is his own fault, has a misfortune that is now wholly deserved, and receives a punishment that exceeds the crime.

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