

Speaking from the Ashes of Empire: Subaltern Consciousness and Counter-Myth in *Ramayana* and *Prometheus*

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Abstract

This article investigates how sacred myths function as political archives that preserve the voice of power while erasing the histories of those it defeats. Through a cross-mythic reading of Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, alongside Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, the study argues that subaltern consciousness emerges not in opposition to heroism but in resistance to the moral authority claimed by divine law. Canonical narratives present the cosmic order as an ethical necessity, yet this order is sustained through exclusion, punishment, and narrative silence. Revisionist texts dismantle this structure by re-centering those marked as demonic, transgressive, or criminal in sacred history. Rather than treating Ravana and Prometheus as symbolic rebels, this study interprets them as ethical subjects produced by regimes of power

that define justice through conquest and suffering. Their rewritten voices expose myth as an ideological instrument that naturalizes hierarchy while denying the historical complexity. By bringing Indian and Greek traditions into dialogue, this article demonstrates that the counter-myth is not merely a modern literary strategy but a form of cultural memory that reclaims agency for the defeated. In recovering what the official myth suppresses, these texts transform storytelling into an act of resistance, unsettling the authority of sacred narratives and opening a space for reimagining justice beyond the rule of the gods.

Keywords: Subaltern Consciousness, Counter-Myth, Sacred Authority, Narrative Power, Comparative Mythology.

Introduction

Who is allowed to be remembered when the gods win, and who is condemned to vanish into the margins of sacred history? This question lies at the heart of the myth itself, for epic narratives do not merely recount divine deeds; they establish the terms through which power becomes moral, conquest becomes order, and suffering becomes necessary. Myths rarely declare themselves as political, yet they function as cultural archives that preserve the logic of authority while erasing the experiences of those who stand outside their borders. The victors are sanctified, and their rule is transformed into cosmic inevitability, while the defeated are remembered only as demons, rebels, or transgressors. In this way, myths do not simply tell stories about the past; they shape the ethical imagination through which societies learn to justify hierarchy and silence dissent.

Across civilizations, epic traditions have served as blueprints for the legitimization of power. In both the Indian and Greek worlds, divine authority is inseparable from the language of the order. Valmiki's *Ramayana* presents Rama as the embodiment of dharma, a ruler whose sovereignty restores the cosmic balance. His actions are rarely questioned because they are positioned within a sacred framework that equates obedience with the moral truth.

Similarly, Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* situates Zeus at the center of a newly established divine regime that enforces stability through fear and punishment. These narratives do not merely describe authority; they consecrate it as a divine gift. The sacred status of such texts grants power a form of ethical immunity, rendering resistance not only unlawful, but also metaphysically wrong.

Within these mythic structures, the defeated are not simply forgotten; they are symbolically necessary to the narrative. Their suffering confirms the righteousness of the ruling order, and their silence sustains the illusion of a universal justice. It is here that the critical insights of Subaltern Studies become indispensable. Ranajit Guha's challenge to elitist historiography and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's unsettling question, *Can the subaltern speak?* exposes how dominant narratives depend on exclusion. Spivak reminds us that even acts of representation are shaped by power and that the subaltern is often spoken for, rather than heard. When applied to myths, this framework reveals how sacred stories function as ideological systems that preserve authority by denying alternative memories.

The demonization of Ravana and the punishment of Prometheus exemplify this logic in the West. Ravana is primarily remembered as the embodiment of adharma, a figure whose destruction restores moral order. Prometheus, who is bound to a rock and condemned to endless torment, becomes a spectacle of divine justice. Yet in both cases, the narratives demand acceptance of suffering without interrogating the system that produces it. The gods write history, and their version of events is indistinguishable from moral truth. What is lost is not only the perspective of the defeated but also the possibility that sacred law itself might be ethically flawed.

Modern rewritings disrupt this closure by returning agency to those cast as enemies of the divine order. Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* reimagines Ravana not as a demon but as a ruler shaped by political struggle, cultural marginalization and personal

loss. His narrative exposes how history is written by victors who erase complexity in the name of Dharma. Likewise, in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, the punished Titan is transformed into a figure of moral resistance whose suffering exposes the tyranny of divine authority. These texts do not merely invert sympathies; they challenge the foundations of mythic justice.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on mythic revisionism, comparative studies often remain confined to cultural boundaries. Indian retellings are rarely placed in dialogue with Western mythic traditions, and Greek texts are seldom read alongside South Asian epics. This separation obscures the shared political logic through which myths operate across civilizations. A cross-mythic approach reveals that the relationship between sacred authority and subaltern silence is structurally recurrent rather than culturally unique. By bringing the *Ramayana* tradition into conversation with the Prometheus cycle, this study seeks to uncover how different cultures articulate the same ethical tensions between power and suffering and law and resistance.

This study is guided by three central questions: How do canonical myths construct divine authority as moral inevitability? Through what narrative strategies are subaltern figures silenced, demonized, or punished? How do modern rewritings transform myth into a space of ethical critique rather than ideological affirmation? By addressing these questions, this study moves beyond the simplistic binaries of hero and villain to examine the deeper politics of mythic storytelling.

Ultimately, this research argues that the counter-myth is not an act of mere reinterpretation but a form of narrative resistance that recovers suppressed histories and reclaims ethical agency for the defeated. When the silenced speak, they do not seek to overthrow the sacred but to expose its fractures. In listening to these voices, we are

compelled to reconsider not only the myths of the past but also the power structures that continue to shape our present.

Myth as Imperial Authority: Construction of Sacred Power

Empire does not always announce itself through conquest or legislation; it often enters through imagination, settling quietly into collective belief. Stories shape how people interpret suffering, obedience, and authority, transforming power into something that feels inevitable rather than imposed. Epic traditions are among the earliest and most enduring instruments of this transformation in the world. The *Ramayana* and the Prometheus cycle, though emerging from different civilizations, reveal how myth functions as an ideological system that converts political power into a sacred necessity. Through the divine kingship of Rama and the tyrannical sovereignty of Zeus, hierarchy is not merely accepted but sanctified, and resistance is reimagined as a cosmic transgression rather than an ethical opposition.

Rama is introduced in Valmiki's *Ramayana* not as a ruler shaped by circumstance but as a preordained presence whose authority originates beyond human reach. He is described as 'dharma embodied, walking the earth to restore order' (*Ramayana* 1.1.8). This declaration removes kingship from political accountability and places it within the theological frame. Rama does not rule because he persuades, negotiates, or earns consent; rather, he rules because he is imagined as the incarnation of cosmic law itself. From the moment he appears, sovereignty is no longer a social contract but rather a sacred condition.

This ideological framing becomes most powerful during the exile. The narrative does not allow readers to see the event as a failure of governance or familial justice. Instead, Rama embraces banishment as moral destiny: 'Let my father's word stand, even if it costs me the throne' (*Ramayana* 2.18.30). This scene transforms political dispossession into spiritual triumph. What could be read as a moment of resistance is instead redirected toward

obedience. Rama's silence is celebrated, and his endurance is a model of social behavior. In this way, suffering is made meaningful and authority is protected from scrutiny.

The effect of such storytelling is subtle yet profound. Obedience is a form of virtue, whereas questioning authority is a sign of moral deficiency. As Romila Thapar argues, the Ramayana embeds kingship within a cosmic framework that makes resistance appear not merely unlawful but sacrilegious (84). Hierarchy is no longer understood as a human construction; it has become the natural order of the universe.

When Rama returns and is crowned king, the narrative presents his reign as a restoration of the cosmic balance. Nature flourishes, people rejoice, and social divisions are harmonized. His authority is not depicted as political dominance but as a universal necessity. Sheldon Pollock notes that in this epic tradition, kingship is 'no longer contingent but metaphysically ordained' (37). Power is no longer something one can challenge because it is framed as part of the cosmic design.

The Prometheus myth reveals a parallel ideological structure, although its tone is far darker. Zeus does not rule through moral purity but through fear and spectacles. In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus is punished not simply for disobedience but also to serve as a public warning. Chained to a rock, his liver devoured daily, he becomes a living monument to the divine authority. Prometheus himself recognizes the political logic behind this violence, declaring that Zeus rules 'by terror, not by law' (*Prometheus Bound* 214). His suffering is not private; it is staged, repeated and ritualized.

Zeus' power is not sustained by ethical legitimacy but by constant enforcement. However, the myth still frames him as a guardian of the cosmic order. His tyranny is presented as being necessary to prevent chaos. Thus, violence becomes stability and domination becomes destiny. Like Rama, Zeus transforms political authority into something sacred, even though his rule is overtly cruel and tyrannical.

Despite their apparent differences, Rama and Zeus operate under the same ideological mechanism. Both are positioned as necessary rulers whose dominance secures the order. One rules through moral sanctity, the other through terror, but both insist that hierarchy is inevitable. These myths teach societies to internalize submission. Michel Foucault argues that power becomes most effective when it appears as truth rather than domination (27). Myth performs this transformation by disguising authority as a cosmic necessity. Resistance in both traditions is framed as a disruption of the universal order. To oppose Rama is to oppose dharma; to challenge Zeus is to threaten the structure of the cosmos. Thus, myths train audiences to fear dissent and sanctify obedience. Power becomes self-sustaining because it is no longer perceived as power.

Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* fractures this sacred illusion by retelling the Ramayana from the perspective of the vanquished. Ravana is no longer a demon but a political leader who defends his people and culture. He recognizes that Rama's divinity is not a universal truth but an ideological construction: 'History belongs to those who win; the rest are reduced to shadows' (Neelakantan 112). From Ravana's perspective, Rama's war is not a moral crusade but an imperial campaign. Ravana's critique exposes dharma as a language of power: What is celebrated as righteousness is revealed to be a conquest. He questions why one civilization's values are elevated as cosmic truths while another's are condemned as evil. In this retelling, the gods are not neutral arbiters but symbols of ideological dominance. *Asura* suggests that sacred power depends on the erasure of alternative moral systems.

Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* performs a similar act of demystification. Zeus is no longer eternal; he is exposed as a tyrant, sustained by fear and illusion. Prometheus' refusal to submit is an ethical stance rather than hubris. He recognizes that Zeus' authority is constructed and therefore capable of collapse: 'To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite...

This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory' (Prometheus Unbound, I.173–178). When Zeus is overthrown, the event is not merely political but also conceptual. The myth itself is rewritten, revealing power to be fragile rather than sacred.

What unites *Asura* and *Prometheus Unbound* is their insistence that divine authority is neither natural nor eternal. Both texts transform myth into a site of political reflection, exposing the mechanisms through which the sacred power is produced. As Gayatri Spivak argues, the task is not only to recover silenced voices but also to interrogate the structures that require their silence (287). These counter-narratives reveal that what appears to be a cosmic truth is often the ideological residue of conquest. The comparison between Rama and Zeus thus uncovers a shared imperial logic beneath the cultural differences. Both figures preside over worlds in which hierarchy is framed as harmony and obedience as virtue. Their narratives teach audiences to equate order with submission and justice with subjugation. However, counter-myths refuse this equation. They insist that beneath the sacred lies a history of exclusion, and that the gods' version of truth is only one among many versions.

Thus, myth is not a neutral inheritance but an ideological archive that preserves the authority of the powerful. Through the construction of sacred kingship and divine sovereignty, it legitimizes inequality and suppresses dissent in the following ways. However, when these narratives are reread through the eyes of the vanquished and rebellious, their sacred aura begins to fracture. What remains is not a divine order but a human history of power, struggle, and resistance.

Silencing the other: Demonization and Punishment

Power rarely survives through persuasion alone. Every sacred order must also decide whom it will exclude, whom it will name as dangerous, and whose pain it will accept as necessary. Myth is one of the earliest instruments through which this process is rehearsed and remembered. In epic narratives, the enemy is not simply defeated; he is reimagined as

monstrous, and his suffering is transformed into proof that the moral universe is intact. The Ramayana and Prometheus myths reveal how demonization and punishment operate together as technologies of silence. Ravana and Prometheus are not merely characters who suffer; they are figures through whom authority disciplines the resistance. Their bodies become a symbolic terrain where power asserts itself, turning dissent into deviance and memory into erasure.

Ravana's transformation into a demon is less a moral verdict than it is a narrative strategy. Valmiki does not allow Ravana to exist as a rival king in a coherent political world of his own. Instead, he is introduced through metaphors of contamination and terror: 'the terror of the three worlds, whose arrogance shook heaven and earth' (*Ramayana* 3.32.15). Such language evacuates him of his humanity. He is no longer a ruler defending a civilization but a cosmic pollutant whose removal promises universal restoration. This framing ensures that Rama's invasion of Lanka is not interpreted as a conquest but as purification. Violence becomes sacred because it is directed against a figure defined as less than human.

The epic's moral clarity depends on this erasure. Ravana is denied the interiority, regret, or ethical ambiguity. His desires are simplified to lust and ambition, while his political authority is stripped of legitimacy. The Asura kingdom is never imagined as a culture with a history, values, or people worthy of grief. Their annihilation is rendered invisible by the moral spectacle of Ravana's death. What remains is a mythic economy in which suffering is meaningful only when it serves the divine order. As Gayatri Spivak argues, the subaltern is not simply oppressed but 'cannot speak' within dominant discourse because the structures of representation erase their voice (287). Ravana's silence is not incidental; rather, it is foundational.

This silencing becomes more apparent when contrasted with Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, which restores Ravana's voice and reveals the political function of

demonization. Ravana reflects that history belongs to those who win, while the defeated are remembered only through distortion (Neelakantan 112). From his perspective, Rama's campaign is not a moral crusade but an imperial expansion that destroys rival civilizations. The *Ramayana's* dharma is exposed as a language of power used to legitimize violence. Ravana recognizes that his transformation into a demon is necessary for Rama's deification. Without a monster, heroes cannot appear righteous.

Neelakantan's Ravana is not innocent, but he is still human. He questions why his culture is condemned as evil while Rama's is elevated as the cosmic truth. He realizes that his demonization is a political necessity for the empire. Sacred power requires an enemy whose destruction is morally urgent. The subaltern body must bear the weight of divine violence so that the dominant order appears just.

Prometheus occupies a parallel position in Greek mythology. In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, he is punished not for harming others but rather for empowering them. By giving fire and knowledge to humanity, he disrupts Zeus's monopoly on power. This act threatens the divine hierarchy, and so Prometheus is framed as a criminal in the myth. His punishment is not proportional; it is an example. Chained to a rock, with his liver devoured daily, he becomes a spectacle of suffering. The repetition of his torture transforms his body into a warning sign. Prometheus himself recognizes this logic, declaring that Zeus rules 'by terror, not by law' (*Prometheus Bound* 214).

Like Ravana, Prometheus has been reduced to a symbol. His pain does not redeem him but disciplines others. His body becomes a public text inscribed with the message that resistance will be annihilated. However, unlike Ravana, Prometheus is allowed to speak. His voice exposes the cruelty beneath divine authority, calling Zeus a tyrant who fears the knowledge he seeks to destroy: Even in chains, Prometheus retains his ethical clarity.

Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* transforms this defiance into a radical vision of human liberation. Prometheus rejects not only Zeus' rule, but also the emotional structures that sustain it. He refuses hatred, recognizing that tyranny feeds on the emotions it provokes. His liberation is achieved through ethical transformation, rather than violence. When Zeus falls, his collapse is not merely political but symbolic: the belief that suffering is divinely ordained is dismantled and sacred power is revealed to be fragile, dependent on fear rather than truth.

Both Ravana and Prometheus are punished not because they are evil, but because they threaten the ideological foundations of power. Ravana resists Rama's moral monopoly, and Prometheus challenges Zeus' divine sovereignty. Their suffering functions as a form of ritual control. Michel Foucault argues that punishment is not simply retribution but a method of producing obedient bodies (27). Myths perform this function on a cosmic scale. It trains societies to internalize fear and accept hierarchy as the natural order.

Yet counter-narratives refuse this script. *Asura* and *Prometheus Unbound* reveal that demonization is not truth but strategy. They expose how sacred power depends upon silencing and suffering. By restoring the voices of the punished, they challenge the moral authority of empire and open space for alternative histories.

Ravana and Prometheus, though separated by culture, share a common fate. They are erased, tortured, and condemned so that power may appear eternal. Yet their stories endure, reminding us that beneath every sacred order lies a history of silenced voices. Myth may construct empire, but it also preserves the traces of those it tries to destroy.

Counter-Myth as Resistance: Reclaiming Subaltern Consciousness

Every civilization preserves its memory through stories that seem too sacred to question. Over time, these narratives harden into cultural truth, deciding who is remembered as righteous and who is condemned as monstrous. Yet beneath these polished myths lie buried histories of exclusion, violence, and silencing. Counter-myth emerges when those

histories surface, when figures once dismissed as villains or rebels begin to speak in their own voices. Through rewriting, what was once fixed becomes fluid. Neelakantan's Ravana and Shelley's liberated Prometheus represent this rupture. Their narratives do not simply retell old stories; they dismantle the ideological structures that once defined them as threats to divine order. In doing so, they reclaim subaltern consciousness and transform myth into a site of political and ethical resistance.

In classical epic traditions, authority is preserved by presenting hierarchy as natural and sacred. Rama's kingship in Valmiki's *Ramayana* is framed as the embodiment of cosmic law, leaving little room for moral debate. He is described as 'dharma embodied, walking the earth to restore order' (*Ramayana* 1.1.8). This description does more than praise a ruler; it removes him from the realm of human accountability. His actions are no longer political choices but divine necessities. Similarly, in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Zeus is portrayed as the absolute ruler of the universe, whose punishments are justified as the defense of cosmic stability. Prometheus recognizes the cruelty behind this divine authority when he declares that Zeus rules 'by terror, not by law' (*Prometheus Bound* 214). In both texts, sacred language conceals political domination.

Counter-myth challenges this concealment by restoring human perspective. Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* refuses to accept the moral simplicity of the original epic. Ravana is no longer a demonic obstacle to righteousness but a ruler whose civilization is destroyed in the name of virtue. He reflects bitterly that history belongs to the victors, while the defeated are remembered only through distortion (Neelakantan 112). This awareness exposes how myth does not merely preserve memory but actively shapes it to serve those in power.

Ravana's reclaimed voice reveals that his demonization is not a moral truth but a political strategy. His people are erased from the narrative, their culture dismissed as evil so

that Rama's conquest may appear sacred. By allowing Ravana to speak, Neelakantan exposes the ideological function of dharma. What appears universal is shown to be selective, shaped by those who control the story. Ravana's resistance is not merely against Rama but against the narrative machinery that transforms defeat into sin.

Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* performs a parallel act of resistance. While Aeschylus presents Prometheus as a tragic sufferer, Shelley reimagines him as a figure who transcends vengeance and redefines freedom. Prometheus rejects hatred, recognizing that tyranny feeds on the emotions it provokes. His liberation is not achieved through violent overthrow but through ethical transformation. When Zeus falls, the collapse is not merely political; it is conceptual. The belief that suffering is divinely ordained is dismantled (Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound* I.173).

Both Ravana and Prometheus refuse to be defined by the myths that condemned them. Their counter-narratives reveal that sacred authority depends on silencing alternative voices. Michel Foucault argues that domination is most effective when it appears as truth rather than coercion (27). Counter-myth disrupts this illusion by exposing the constructed nature of divine power. What unites these figures is not innocence but consciousness. They recognize that the stories told about them are instruments of control. By rewriting these narratives, they reclaim agency. Gayatri Spivak reminds us that the task is not merely to recover silenced voices but to interrogate the structures that required their silence (287). Neelakantan and Shelley achieve this by transforming myth into a contested space.

Counter-myth therefore becomes a form of revolt. It challenges the sacred foundations of hierarchy and opens space for ethical imagination. Ravana and Prometheus remind us that beneath every divine narrative lies a human history of struggle. To rewrite myth is to reclaim the right to define oneself.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that myth is not a passive cultural inheritance but an active structure through which authority is produced and preserved. In the *Ramayana* tradition and the Promethean cycle, divine power is upheld through moral absolutism and historical erasure that present domination as sacred order. Reading Valmiki and Aeschylus alongside Neelakantan and Shelley reveals how canonical texts normalize empire, while their revisions recover silenced perspectives buried within mythic memory. Ravana and Prometheus appear not as transgressors, but as ethical challengers whose suffering exposes the violence beneath divine justice. Their voices unsettle inherited certainty and reveal how law, worship, and obedience are shaped by ideology rather than moral truth. Across cultures and literary traditions, counter-myth becomes a site where suppressed identities reclaim narrative space and redefine meaning. The tension between tradition and resistance transforms myth into a living discourse rather than a closed moral system. Retelling becomes a political act that confronts the legitimacy of imposed authority and reopens history to those written out of it. Through these reimagined figures, myth shifts from a tool of power to a language of dissent, enabling readers to envision justice beyond inherited structures and to recognize resistance as a creative force shaping collective memory.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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