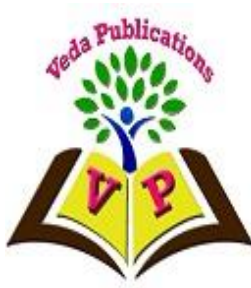




## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**RESISTANCE AGAINST CONVENTIONAL MASCULINITY IN SELECTED MYTHOLOGICAL FICTION OF ANAND NEELAKANTAN AND USHA NARAYANAN**

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This paper primarily focuses on the delineation of relationship between masculinity and mythology in selected Indian fiction in English of Anand Neelakantan and Usha Narayanan. It attempts to re-access several critical facts of Indian mythology and related literary pieces that goes beyond the parameters of colonial and postcolonial viewpoints in India. The paper offers some points where the mythological characters took contemporary form surpassing the conventional treatment of masculinity, class, caste and gender performances. The connection between the social divisions like caste, class and gender performance is clearly presented. The paper through qualitative interpretations also tries to interrogate, negate and create new critical points of interpretations that reconstructed various theoretical dimensions and definitions. It also directs the studies on mythology in a new pattern presenting mythology as an important and essential academic discourse. It makes the discussion highly significant to meet the academic and scholarly demands of recent and upcoming time.

**Keywords:** *Caste, Gender, Masculinity, Men, Nature.*



Gender is a notable issue of contemporary academic studies whereas a conventional process of making dualities between men and women is apparent on the dynamic of "Purusha-Prakriti" in India. It connected the actions of women with the features of nature whereas men are typically alienated from this. The point of fertility connected women and nature in traditional assessment to make difference with the actions of men. It is a matter of theoretical studies of eco-criticism and eco-feminism to highlight the ground of subjugation of both women and nature by patriarchy. However, it became very difficult and vague for men to identify their roles on eco-criticism and eco-feminism and more specifically role related to nature and environment. On this point, in theoretical arena of late twentieth and twenty first century, eco-masculinity had been originated to subvert the conventional gender justification of men as well as to provide suitable suggestion for action. It offers the space to men to perform in the resistance against the exploitation of nature and women. But most notably it allows them to detect the source of exploitation of men as well and to invent new set of identities in relationship with nature. Notable scholars of eco-masculinity are Paul Pule, Richard Twine, Greta Gaad who reconstructed the identity, performances of men with reference to the sensitivity of nature. Notably, they attempted to overrule the restrictions vested upon the gender identities of men and more specifically connection with nature. In the opinion of Paul Pule, the hegemonic patriarchal set up of the society didn't allow men to be conscious about nature and their own behaviours, actions. They are compelled to perform the roles that are socially assigned to them. In this regard men-nature interaction offers a scope to break the stereotyped gender identity. This interaction may be treated as a tool of resistance also. If the role of nurturing connected women with nature the same may be applicable to men too. But prominence is to be given upon self-caring along with caring others including family members. Self-consciousness should be germinated from men regarding their health and safety issues. This consciousness enables them to be eco-friendly

human being. Actually, as in the conventional estimation of masculinity self-care or self-nurturing and nurturing others are not included and initially this estimation tried to separate men from such performances. However, if these are considered as human consciousness or human action without any connection with gender performance it would be easier to offer men a space of such actions.

Eco-masculinity doesn't provoke only to enhance intellectual faculty about environment but to make emotional rapport between nature and men. Richard Twine elaborated the issue from a different perspective with the argument that a stereotyped connection between nature and men are available that is the wildness of men having the attribute of being a good macho type hunter. This form of masculinity is extremely unhealthy for nature, beasts and importantly for men as it creates the identity of exploiter or dominator. Twine suggested to replace violence with emotion, empathy, collaboration as the indicator of such relationship. Twine also directed the issue through socio-political channels treating the hunter like masculinity as equivalent of colonial aggression. So, subversion of such performance is a sort of anti-colonial resistance. On this assessment both eco-feminism and eco-masculinity are to be treated as postcolonial and poststructuralist academic discourses. Actually, hegemonic and hunter form of masculinity attempted to subjugate not only the nature and women but also all who are close to nature. It has broad socio-political connotation as it partially creates intra set up of hierarchy in masculinities that differentiate the urban men from the rustic men who are close to nature.

In the fiction *Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara (2018)*, in the presentation of Anand Neelakantan, the 'Vanara' (monkeys) of Ramayana are shown as "vana-nara" (forest men) or a community of lower caste subaltern men of forest. A contrast is apparent between the upper caste culture and lower caste culture of the aboriginal subaltern men. However, the author presented the primitive identities of such people including language, culture, custom as the indicators of their authenticity and the tools of resistance. On theoretical perspectives, in



the fiction the affinity between nature and the main male characters like Baali, Sugreeva is apparent as such tool to combat the class and caste discrimination. Like the propaganda of colonization the assumed dualities between civilized and uncivilized from imperial perspective is apparent in that faction. This tendency is vividly apparent in colonized and postcolonial India also creating the possibility of neo-colonization from the intra set up of socio-political system of the nation. However, nature, environment and gender performances are vividly affected from such socio-political propaganda and dualities. The author narrated the origin of 'vana-nara' through the tales of the forest that was contrary to the so-called sacred songs of upper castes. It's a resistance against the system that denied to recognize the primitive identity of forest men. The juxtaposition of tribal song, tribal identity and nature is highly significant on this point. It authenticated the affinity, friendship between nature and forest men. Actually, the condition the existential crisis of 'vana-nara' and the crisis of the forest is similar whereas the living forest of 'vananara' was snatched by the upper classes for the enrichment of their civilization.

In the fiction the upper caste patriarchs performed ritualistic actions chanting the Sanskrit scriptures. In their estimation the language of 'vananara' was considered as 'Prakrut' that was neglected unrefined and closed to nature. Generally, the upper caste patriarchs may be considered as the colonizers who treated the languages, customs, rituals, culture of the colonized or politically dominated people as inferior. The author presented the description of the difference of the system under which the children of upper caste and the vana-nara community had grown up. This episode is to be compared with the hardships and deprivation faced by the children of 'dalit' communities in colonial and postcolonial India. Baali and Sugreeva were treated as untouchable whereas their physical existence and foot prints would pollute the entire surrounding as per the observation of upper caste patriarchs. On this point the opinion of RajeswarMittapalli is significant who opined that "Appearances have changed, political setup has changed but attitudes and mindsets have remained unaltered. The upper caste

social groups nonchalantly practice untouchability and feel none the worse for it. Several discourses are invoked to legitimize this inhuman practice (Mittapalli 5)." This is the traditional ongoing system that is required to be reconfigured. Baali's resistance and struggle for survival is not individual but the representative of entire society. However, the author showed the lack of consciousness about gender in the subaltern 'vana-nara' community whereas they were confined within the dualities of men and women. It was not in their intellectual domain that any action of resistance was not in need of taking recognition from the social system of gender. However, in spite of deconstructing the binary between men and women Usha Narayanan offered a space to transgender also through introducing a transgender character Riksharajas. Most notably the act of resistance is shown through this character to break the association of gender with actions or performances. It offers extreme flexibility on gender as well as any sort of performance. This situation may be placed on the categorization of Masculinity of R.W. Connell in *Masculinities* (1995). Connell suggested four types of masculinities like Hegemonic, subordinated, complicit and marginalized masculinity whereas the men of marginalized masculinity are subjugated by upper three section of masculinities. It certainly certified that masculinity is not any homogenous identity but heterogeneous having the possibility of intra level of hierarchal system from where men can also be victimized within patriarchal system. It also shows the possibility of resistance from the part of men against the patriarchal hegemonic masculinity system. In the fiction two kinds of masculine position is apparent whereas the transgender character Riksharajas belonged to subordinated status on the one perspective, on the another belonged to marginalized section like other 'vana-nara' men. This marginalized status of masculinity is vested upon them due to their skin complexion and subjugated racial identities. Here the opinion of R.W. Connell is highly significant that "Race relations may also become an integral part of the dynamics between masculinities. In a white supremacist context, black masculinities play symbolic roles for white gender



construction (Connell 80).” The situation can be compared with *Dream of A Monkey Mountain* of Derek Walcott whereas Makak considered himself as inferior before the white colonizers due to his skin complexion and racial identities. However, at last Makak in dream identified his true self and returned to Monkey Mountain. Both in case of ‘vanara’ of Ramayana and Makak in *Dream of a Monkey Mountain* the names signified monkey. It can be interpreted on colonial attributed that attempted to dehumanize the black persons with reference to zoological terms and association. In this fiction of Neelakantan similar situation is apparent in case of vana-nara forest dweller clan. In this regard discussion on the doctrine of Manu, an Indian law giver can elaborate the point. Manu opined that the lower caste people were privileged of having only dog and donkey. It partially placed the people of lower caste community on the level of dog and donkey in ecological system. It attempts to treat the lower caste people as the cheap entity of the society. In the text Narayanan offered awareness in Riksarajas, Baali who attempted to build their own kingdom and living places for ‘vana-nara’ in Kiskinda that offers an alternative interpretation of their position through literary narrations.

Usha Narayanan in the fiction *Kartikeya and His Battle with the Soul Stealer* (2020) attempted to re-narrate the mythological episodes of Kartiya. However, she provided the narration of Kartikeya as the eco-masculine man, not the warrior leader of divine army. It also offered the model of subversion of Indian masculine identities. It deals with the life journey of Kartikeya after being abandoned and brought up in forest. It enables him to bear the feelings of vulnerability, fear, timidity. Narayanan replaced the warrior attitude of Kartikeya with compassion, love, passion, desire of comradeship. Eco-masculinity had been vividly germinated in this character through his resistance against any kind of violence, hunting, animal sacrifice for liturgical purposes. The author created the surroundings and background of Kartikeya with nature, trees, mountain, hills, beasts, birds and rustic people. The mutual interaction between a human child and beasts is brilliantly delineated by the author whereas

fear, wonder, mystery, eagerness are apparent from both sides. His interaction with wild birds, animals extended the discourses on human interaction with nature, inter species communication. Kartikeya learnt how to climb, how to swim and how to handle the crisis in natural ambience that certified the self-consciousness regarding nature. His declaration is mentioned in the text as “I do not know who abandoned me here and feel bitter and angry at times. But now I am happy with my animal family. I no longer wish to return to my parents, even if they come to claim me (*Kartikeya* 38)”. In this regard a sort of intra-species communal unity is created before any calamity.

In mythology, Kartikeya is the son of Shiva and Parvati and thus belonged to the higher order of socio hierarchy. The author attempted to deconstruct the position of Kartikeya through directing the plot of his growing up in open nature, under the care of folk people, beasts and birds. This is also a further step of reconfiguration of the order of masculinity based on social hierarchy. Kartikeya’s interaction with birds and beasts enhanced the scope of inter-special communication in a harmonious way surpassing the hunter like attitude and masculinity. It shows a tendency of co-operation from both sides specially their struggle for survival before any sort of calamity. Not only with the animals, the friendship of Kartikeya is created with the folk tribal men including a girl of same age that provokes to surpass the barriers of gender, class, caste of colonized and postcolonial India. Notably Kartikeya is presented in some cases as the protector of all who were associated with forest but it was not the outcome of his masculine arrogance or pride but his responsibility of being a friend and a part of the forest and forest dwellers. This responsibility is not the burden of the social system that is typically vested upon Indian men through the guise of masculine obligations. Kartikeya along with the wild living beings fought collectively against the upper caste divine patriarchs who attempted to hamper the eco-system and environment of the forest. The author vividly described two types of masculinity, one is the subjugator and another is the protector and lover of the nature. Kartikeya’s victory against such



subjugator patriarchy offers more flexibility in masculinity and gender performances in India in alternative ways. Being relevant on this point the connection between masculinity and animal is to be briefly discussed. Rochelle Stevenson elaborated the matter with the argument that the traditional system had already been subverted whereas it was earlier assumed that only women wanted companion animal and they mourn at their loss. Actually, in contemporary time the attitude of men towards animals both domestic and wild had been changed that is taken as a subject in literature and social studies also. It is to be thought critically that a category of hegemonic men want to dominate nature and animals that is the byproduct of their tendency to dominate or colonize others. Notably, their victim has no stable form, it may be women, men, animal or nature. The conception of hunting masculinity is mainly responsible for this that is to be subverted first. Notably, some hunters have the tendency to keep the body parts of the hunted animals in their trophy rooms that is a psychological condition full of narcissism to present self-masculinity as atypical from all forms of other masculinities. Not only narcissism a sense of homophobia works also of being emasculated before other men. Usha Narayanan was fully aware about such facts before presenting Kartikeya and his friends in this fiction. In a report of survey Kellert and Benny elaborated a matter that domestic animals are more preferable to men than the wild animals. An elaboration of the fact is found in the observation of Stevenson that hegemonic masculinity instructs men to keep trained animals as the marker of macho masculinity in the sense that such animals would work as per the whim of the male masters. Another notable fact is that in the contemporary situation of twenty first century it is an indicator of financially strong masculinity of having the ability of paying the maintenance charge for a pet animal. It is the fact that as it's not easy to make a wild animal tame, hegemonic masculinity tends to choose pet animals through whom they could satisfy masculine narcissism and financially show offing dignity. However, in the fiction, in the interaction between Kartikeya and wild animals' subversion of such facts is apparent. Kartikeya never

did treat this interaction as the way of satisfying his narcissism or dominative arrogance of masculinity but he shared his joy, sorrow, emotion with them. In the text the nature of this relationship is presented through the narration of Kartikeya that "I wish the deer and the peacock could watch me dance! ...They must miss me as much as I miss them (*Kartikeya*83)." Kartikeya resisted against the upper caste patriarchal ritualistic performances also for which animals were sacrificed. Even he provided an alternative interpretation with the argument that "The scripture never prescribes violence of any kind. This "aja" or goat is not what gods seek; instead, offer another "aja" – rice (*Kartikeya* 93)." In India, from colonial to postcolonial period the protector role of men is socially approved but it is generally confined within familial to national level. Protecting the nature, natural components including animals and birds are not sufficiently highlighted in Indian masculine identities. The author directed the studies of postcolonialism in a different direction through Kartikeya who liberated the birds, animals and moreover nature from caged or metaphorically colonized state. This is the extended version of postcolonial studies on human-nature interaction. The role of men are reconfigured on this background with wide flexibility and alternative interpretations.

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