



# Memory as Counter Narrative: A Subaltern *Ramayana*

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**Abstract**— In Manini.J.Anandani's *Mandodari, Queen of Lanka* the author employs memory as a tool for the narrative of the persona as well as an era. The narrative is in the form of recollections by Mandodari, who is extolled as the pious and virtuous queen of the mighty king of Lanka in the epic tale. In this process of recreation, the hidden aspects of his personality and character came to the fore. As her memory took the form of a narrative, it is revealed how he shouldered the responsibility of the emancipation and the upliftment of his race from a very early age onwards, how he along with his siblings were treated as half-castes, how the knowledge of Vedas was denied to him and so on. Mandodari's recollections never attempt to obliterate the dark corners of Dashaanan's character. Her narrative provides an alternate representation of the cliched narration of the epics, thus creating a counter narrative of the familiar tales of *Ramayana*. As Mandodari walks down the memory lane, the entire discourse of *Ramayana* necessitated a reconstitution as Ravana is viewed through the eyes of a person who knows him from within. Her memory recreates Ravana as Dashaanan, remoulded him to an individual who is not familiar to the readers of mythology.



**Keywords**— Memory, retelling, narrative, counter-narrative

The Hindu mythological epic *Ramayana* has innumerable versions and Manini.J.Anandani's debut work of fiction *Mandodari, Queen of Lanka* is a retelling based on the Jaina version. In Indian Writing in English retellings of mythology are either from a subaltern or from a feminine perspective. In *Mandodari, Queen of Lanka*, though the narrator is a gendered subaltern, the retelling neither focused on the marginalization nor on the gender oppression in the mythological tale though these themes remain as a subtext. The narrative is in the form of recollections by Mandodari, who is extolled as the pious and virtuous queen of the mighty king of Lanka in the epic tale. In almost all the versions of the epic she is portrayed as a woman who had tolerated the debauchery of a cruel, despotic, immoral and lecherous man and had loved him in spite of all his faults. Mythology portrays Ravana as the archetype of evil and injustice; as a foil to Rama- to accentuate his nobility, justice and righteousness. Through the ages Rama and Ravana became stereotypical binaries.

Sidonie Smith opines "Memory is ultimately a story about, and thus a discourse on, original experience,"

something that actually occurred in the past. The past can never be "articulated outside the structures of language and storytelling" (*A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*45). As Mandodari walks down the memory lane, the entire discourse of *Ramayana* necessitated a reconstitution as Ravana is viewed through the eyes of a person who knows him from within. She is one who knows all his follies, foibles and weaknesses. Her memory recreates Ravana as Dashaanan, remoulded him to an individual who is not familiar to the readers of mythology. In this process of recreation, the hidden aspects of his personality and character came to the fore; he emerged as a new individual in flesh and blood, much more adorable and honourable than the recognized heroes of mythology. As her memory took the form of a narrative, he is not the demonized Rakshasa in the epic, not even by his race. James Olney's concepts about memory is relevant in the context. He says: "Memory enables and vitalizes narrative; in return, narrative provides form for memory, supplements it, and sometimes displaces it" (*Memory and Narrative*417)

Mandodari's recollections never attempt to obliterate the dark corners of Dashaanan's character. Rather, she always exposes it, fights against it and expresses her reproach and revulsion to his practices. All the aspects of his personality -his uncontrollable anger, insatiable lust for power, indomitable ambition, egoistic arrogant nature etc. are brought to the forefront in her recollections. But she can't resist loving him due to his admirable qualities which outweighs all these negative shadings. All the major incidents of the epic tale are discussed by Mandodari through her reminiscences, and it provides an alternate representation of the cliched narration of the epics, thus creating a counter narrative of the familiar tales of Ramayana. They reveal a post truth experience to the events which are internalized in the collective individual psyche.

Her memory of Dashaanan begins with his arrival at her father's court at Mayarashtra as a distinguished guest. He is hailed as a Brahmin boy who is a scholar and also a Shiva *bhakta*. He wished to get some architectural advice from her father, the great architect, king Maya on building temples in his kingdom. He was playing *Veena* when she first met him in the court. She, the extremely beautiful princess of Mayarashtra was captivated by the young ruler of Lanka. Later, when she reached Lanka as his wife, she realized that what she heard about the prosperity of 'golden' Lanka and the popularity of Lankesh, was not an exaggeration.

Dashaanan was very fond of advanced technology. He had constructed six operational airports in Lanka.... The airports were equipped with navigational expertise as well as hangars for his flying *vimanas*. His empire spread over various lands.... (*Mandodari Queen of Lanka* 17)

He loved his people very much and they loved him in return abundantly.

People in Lanka rejoiced and I could see how much Dashaanan meant to them. They loved him, blessed him and prayed to him like he was their god. Lanka was a flourishing kingdom. There was plenty of food, gold, skilled artists, promising technology, soldiers and the city was well-planned. (19)

Mandodari reminisced how the very first time when they were together after the marriage, he confessed her about his failings as an individual. "I made more foes than friends; I made more errors than success. And yet, I believe you will accept me the way I am". (22) Born as the

eldest son of the great Rishi Vishravas and his second wife, the Asura princess Kaikasi, he and his younger siblings were always treated as half castes. She realized that her husband had trodden hard and rough paths to become the king of Lanka and it was those miseries and hardships which he experienced that moulded his character.

Mandodari, this journey of our life might not be easy for you. You were a princess, not a stranded offspring who was always given half-caste treatment. You may find it difficult to understand me at times but you have to trust my goals (22)

He had shouldered the responsibility of the emancipation and the upliftment of his race from a very early age onwards and the sacrifices made by his mother for the sake of it were there in his memory also. He could never get over his childhood memories which were rather unpleasant. The Brahmin sages and Rishis, prohibited them to learn Vedas and Upanishads though their father is a Brahmin. But it was only because of the intervention of their father, they were finally able to learn it. Ravan mastered all the branches of knowledge with a vengeance and he became an acclaimed scholar.

Dashaanan and his siblings were taught mainly by their father. Education and knowledge empowered them. They learned advanced skills that even the most learned sages fail to master. And then Dashaanan began to eradicate most of the sages to prove his valour. Rumours went around that he would store the blood of the sages he killed in a large pot. (79)

His insatiable hunger for knowledge even later in life may be attributed to his childhood experiences. As memory theorist and psychologist Dan McAdams observes,

Certain events from our past take on extraordinary meaning over time as their significance in the overall story of our lives and times come to be known. In a sense, then our current situation in life and our anticipation of what the future will bring partly determine what we remember and how we remember it (*The Stories We Live By* 295)

This concept is exemplified through the biographical sketch of the powerful anti-hero of the celebrated epic. Dashaanan's hunger for power and the resultant expansion of his territory brought him new allies.

It also resulted in his new marriages for political advancements. Though it hurts Mandodari very much, she accepted it as the queen of Lanka and as the first wife of Lankeshwar. "I was a dejected wife, who had to unwillingly share her husband with other women; a struggling queen, who failed to match the king's ambitions" (*Mandodari Queen of Lanka* 97). It was customary for a queen to accept the new wives of the king as it is for the wellbeing of their country. Though she reluctantly admitted his new wives she could not excuse him for his innumerable women in the *antapura*, his concubines, his women of pleasure. Dashaanan confided to her "- but I feel like conquering more than ever before- even if it is beauty in the form of a woman". (52)

As a self-made man he was very proud of his capabilities and also very egoistic and arrogant. The unfortunate incident with Vedavati is not the act of a lecherous boud, but the spontaneous reaction of an egoistic arrogant man who could not tolerate a beautiful woman preferring Lord Vishnu over him. But he was fiercely protective of his family and his people, blindly believed in the loyalty of his blood and was ready to risk anything to safeguard the honour of his family which ended up in his doom. His pride in his family and his immediate relatives was unquestionable.

Mandodari justifies his murder of his sister's husband as inevitable to safeguard the security of their country. Though Ravana killed him in self-defence it was an incident for which he regretted throughout his life. Memory of that ill-fated event and her husband's face after that incident is fresh in the mind of Mandodari. "I saw regret in my husband's eyes.... I have never seen him so repentant at anybody's death after any battle." (160)

Her recollections reveal Dashaanan as a man completely broken down by the betrayal of his younger brother. He wanted his brother to reconsider his decision to leave Lanka. As an affectionate brother he nobly assured his sister-in-law that her husband's decision will not in any way affect her position in his kingdom. Finally, when his sister for whose sake the catastrophic chain of events had started, revealed her true intentions Dashaanan with stoic resignation accepts her confession. His honour and his dedication is evident in his reply to her.

The only regret I have, dear sister, is that although we fought for your honour, you considered me your adversary. While we were fighting the war for you and also for my people, I had my own brother Vibhishana and you wanting to see me fail. Now you can leave, at ease after your confession, yet I have to fight this

war today for my people and my kingdom. (249)

It was the treachery and accusations of his own siblings, his own blood, that devastated Dashaanan. For indeed, as memory theorist John A. Robinson observes, "The meaning of any experience can change over time. New information or an altered perspective can prompt us to reinterpret specific experiences or entire segments of our personal history" (*Remembering Our Past* 202).

Dashaanan was a fiercely protective father who wants to avoid the hardships of his childhood to his offspring.

I am planning the birth of my son and I want the planetary positions to be perfect. I don't want my son to struggle like I did. My childhood and youth were ravaged by a constant struggle to uplift my people. I fought for my rights, my education, my caste, my clan and my family. Hence, I want my son to have all advantages. (*Mandodari Queen of Lanka* 127)

His affectionate longing for a daughter, which she recollects, reveals the tenderness in him

I want a daughter with you, Mandodari. I am known to be a rakshasa who didn't hesitate for a minute before killing the Brahmins. I am known to be egoistic, selfish and proud. I am known as a womanizer, full of lust and greed. But my daughter, she will be my pride. I will win the world for her. I will fulfill all her dreams. I will care for her, protect her from every evil. (88)

He was so misjudged by the people who could not understand his personality, as evident from the words of Mai at Mandodari's repentance at the loss of her daughter "He has touched several women with his lustful hands and so he wasn't fortunate enough to hold his own daughter with those hands!" (119).

Finally, when he came to know that the ominous woman in his life, whom he held as a hostage to avenge the humiliation of his sister, is their own daughter, he has reached on a verge from where he could not turn away. He could not forgive Mandodari for hiding the truth from him for so long.

This is unforgivable...Look at what we have lost. I have a daughter that I so longed for, whom I have held hostage. My own daughter curses me every day.

It is her husband I am to fight..... My daughter is a prisoner in her own home. Like a nomad she wandered with her husband at his service. Is this her destiny? Was she born to suffer? (238)

He looked longingly at Sita, when he left for his final war, with the affection of a father whom she never recognized. He did not want her to realise him as her father as it will make her repentant later. He wants her to hate him as it is better for her life.

But his pride and honour did not permit him from turning away or withdrawing himself from what he had initiated. The words of his son Meghnad echoed his thoughts. "This war is not about Sita anymore. It is about all we have lost. They started this war with a purpose-to defeat the reign of rakshasas." (243). Dashaanan is a man who is guided by noble motives, but traversed through shoddy paths to achieve those motives which paved the way for his destruction.

He was ready to accept the superior strength of Vali and his friendship when Vali defeated him. His warm reception of Angad as he realized that the young Vanara is his friend's son and his honorable reply to Rama's message to return Sita are all instances to provide his perspective towards relationship and honour which made him an adorable person.

In the final war also, justice and righteousness displayed by him is admirable when he is certain about his defeat and imminent death. Mandodari remembers his words "They are right outside the gates of my city. I am bound by the laws of war or else I would have finished them off before they could have landed" (229). But the morality and the righteousness of the victors were suspicious and questionable.

Some nights, monkeys would loot our temples and granaries. Their supposed morality had been reduced to farce. They assaulted our women, beating them, tearing their clothes, sometimes even dragging them out of their chambers. (245)

Treachery and deception were employed by them to win the war. As Malyavan has rightly pointed out, they were on a mission to destroy the reign of the rakshasa domain and it was Dashaanan's attempt to revenge for the sake of his sister that made Lanka a target to them. His words to Meenakshi emphasized the actual intention of the war.

Your desire for revenge provoked your brother to abduct Sita, and Rama's mission got a new dimension wherein he

had reason to attack one of the greatest rakshasa kingdoms. It was for you that Dashaanan took Sita captive and lured her husband out to war, thereby marking Lanka as a possible target. (249)

Malyavan rightly judged Vibhishana's betrayal also. "He has been sulking for ages. His incompetence made him insecure. Going against his brother's commands was a petty ploy to prove he could be a better king" (214) "A brother who wants to finish another brother for his throne...how else would you justify his decision to join Rama?" (218). Ravan's prophetic statement on war became true when Vibhishana, the one who betrayed his loyalty became the king after the war. Mandodari recollects his words, "A war costs lives; it claims the throne, causes destruction and leaves a kingdom deprived of food, wealth and sometimes even the right ruler" (248,249).

As an individual, Dashaanan was completely aware of the drawbacks of his character or his failings, as he considers it. He is ready to admit it especially during the intimate moments with his wife whom he trusted more than himself. He confessed to Mandodari,

I do not wish to go into any battle or war. I have ruled this kingdom for decades; nobody has ever challenged me on my land before. The revenge I seek is not worth a battle so massive. I have lost my son, my people, but I am far too gone to turn back now. My pride will not let me, my arrogance.... You had once told me that my arrogance made me who I was and I'd much rather sustain it than give it up now (228,229)

As Mandodari has observed about him "Arrogance is now one of your characteristics, Lankeshwar, and it makes you who you are." (153)

He was a scholar, a man of great learning, who was at a loss when he puts his knowledge into practice. As a man who has great knowledge in astrology and different branches of science, he developed these branches of knowledge in his kingdom so that their physicians can even identify the gender of a child when it is in its mother's womb.

As a man who has carved his destiny for himself and achieved name and fame at a very early age along with the absence of proper guidance and advice regarding matters of ethics and morality affects his personality. Dashaanan fails to recognize the thin borderline between ambition and over ambition, righteousness and unrighteousness, ethical and unethical. He fails to understand where to stop. His

imprisonment of the Navagraha gurus and making them to obey his orders in matters regarding the destiny of individuals and his chemical experiments that resulted in producing the heavenly elixir *Amruth* which he placed below his navel by conducting a surgery were the result of this lack of guidance.

In her retelling the author employs memory as a tool for the narrative of the persona as well as an era. The advanced technologies, branches of knowledge, architecture and the prosperity of a pre-historic nation is unravelled. This retelling can also be viewed as a counter narrative, a *Ravanayana*, replacing the mythological narratives which have acquired an archetypal stature. As Mandodari's memories are shaped into a narrative, Dashaanan has transformed to the stature of a Greek epic hero whose fatal tragic flaw resulted in the inevitable tragedy.

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