

**Deconstructing Victory: Narrative, Power, and Moral Relativism in Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: The Rise of Kali***

---

**S. Poonthamilprabu<sup>1</sup>**

Research Scholar

**Dr. P. Karthi<sup>2</sup>**

Research Supervisor and Associate Professor & Head,

Department of English, Gobi Arts and Science College, Gobichettipalayam, Erode, Tamil Nadu, India.

---

**Article Received:** 09/03/2026

**Article Accepted:** 17/04/2026

**Published Online:** 19/04/2026

**DOI:** 10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.04.337

---

### **Abstract**

This paper examines Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: The Rise of Kali* (2015) as a philosophical reconfiguration of narrative authority and moral epistemology within the *Mahabharata* tradition. Drawing on postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, and Foucauldian notions of power/knowledge, the study argues that Neelakantan destabilizes canonical binaries such as dharma and adharma through a perspectival inversion centered on Duryodhana. Using qualitative textual analysis, the paper demonstrates how the novel reconstitutes the "villain" as a site of ethical inquiry and challenges the epistemic legitimacy of dominant narratives. The study contributes to philosophical debates on moral relativism, narrative truth, and the politics of representation in literary discourse.

**Keywords:** Moral relativism; Narrative epistemology; Postcolonial theory; Subaltern studies; Mahabharata; Indian philosophy

### **1. Introduction**

The *Mahabharata* has long been interpreted as a moral allegory structured around the triumph of dharma over adharma. However, such binary interpretations obscure the epistemological complexity embedded within the epic. Contemporary retellings, particularly Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: The Rise of Kali* (2015), challenge this moral absolutism by foregrounding alternative perspectives.

This paper argues that *Ajaya* is not merely a literary retelling but a **philosophical intervention** that interrogates the nature of moral truth and narrative authority. While existing scholarship on mythological retellings has explored issues of adaptation and cultural memory (Hutcheon, 1988; Richman, 1991), insufficient attention has been paid to their philosophical implications, particularly in relation to **moral relativism and epistemic power**.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Narrative and Power**

Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge provides a critical lens for understanding how narratives produce and legitimize truth. According to Foucault (1980), power operates through discursive formations that define what counts as knowledge. In this sense, the *Mahabharata* can be viewed as a hegemonic narrative that privileges the Pandava perspective.

Neelakantan's retelling disrupts this structure by re-centering the narrative around Duryodhana, thereby exposing the contingency of narrative truth.

### **2.2 Postcolonial Rewriting and Hybridity**

Homi K. Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes cultural texts as sites of hybridity where dominant meanings are negotiated and rearticulated. *Ajaya* exemplifies this hybridity by blending traditional epic material with modern ideological concerns, thereby destabilizing fixed interpretations.

Edward Said (1978) further emphasizes that representation is inherently political. By privileging one narrative over another, texts participate in structures of domination. *Ajaya* resists this dominance by offering a counter-narrative.

### **2.3 Subaltern Voice and Ethical Recovery**

Gayatri Spivak's (1988) notion of the subaltern is central to this analysis. Duryodhana, as a marginalized figure within the epic tradition, represents a silenced voice whose perspective is systematically excluded.

By enabling Duryodhana to "speak," Neelakantan performs an act of narrative recovery that aligns with subaltern historiography (Guha, 1982).

## **3. Methodology**

This study employs **qualitative textual analysis** to examine:

- Narrative perspective
- Character reconstruction
- Ethical ambiguity
- Discursive strategies

The analysis is interpretive and informed by philosophical and literary theory.

#### **4. Perspectival Inversion and Moral Relativism**

One of the most significant philosophical contributions of *Ajaya* is its **rejection of moral absolutism**. By presenting Duryodhana as a rational and ethically complex subject, the novel destabilizes the binary logic of good versus evil.

This aligns with Nietzschean critiques of morality, where values are understood as contingent rather than universal. The narrative compels readers to confront the possibility that moral judgments are shaped by perspective rather than objective truth.

#### **5. Demythologization and Human Agency**

Unlike traditional versions of the *Mahabharata*, *Ajaya* minimizes supernatural elements, thereby foregrounding human agency. This demythologization transforms the epic into a socio-political narrative grounded in realism.

Roland Barthes (1972) argues that myths function as ideological constructs that naturalize cultural values. By stripping away divine intervention, Neelakantan exposes the constructed nature of mythological authority.

#### **6. Power, Justice, and Ethical Ambiguity**

The novel critically interrogates the concept of dharma, revealing it as a flexible construct employed to justify power. The Pandavas, traditionally viewed as moral exemplars, are depicted as ethically compromised figures.

This representation aligns with Foucault's (1980) assertion that power shapes moral discourse. Justice, in this framework, is not an absolute principle but a product of ideological negotiation.

#### **7. The Politics of Narrative Truth**

*Ajaya* foregrounds the multiplicity of narrative perspectives, thereby challenging the notion of a singular historical truth. This aligns with postmodern critiques of grand narratives (Hutcheon, 1988).

The novel suggests that what is remembered as "truth" is often the result of narrative

dominance rather than objective reality.

### 8. Contemporary Philosophical Relevance

The philosophical concerns raised in *Ajaya*—including moral relativism, epistemic authority, and narrative plurality—resonate with contemporary debates in ethics and political theory.

In a global context marked by competing narratives and ideological polarization, the novel's emphasis on perspectival multiplicity acquires renewed significance.

### 9. Conclusion

Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: The Rise of Kali* constitutes a significant philosophical intervention in mythological discourse. By re-centering the narrative around a marginalized figure, the novel challenges dominant epistemologies and redefines moral inquiry.

This study demonstrates that *Ajaya* is not merely a literary retelling but a critical exploration of the relationship between narrative, power, and truth. It underscores the necessity of engaging with multiple perspectives in order to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of ethical and historical realities.

### References

- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. Hill and Wang.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge*. Pantheon.
- Poonthamilprabu, S., & Karthi, P. (2025). Ravana's saga: A multifaceted exploration in *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* by Anand Neelakantan. *Industrial Engineering Journal*, 54(4, No. 3), 27.
- Guha, R. (1982). *Subaltern Studies I*. Oxford University Press.
- Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. Routledge.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). *¿Can the Subaltern Speak?* University of Illinois Press.
- Neelakantan, A. (2015). *Ajaya: The Rise of Kali*. Leadstart.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe*. Princeton University Press.
- Poonthamilprabu, S., & Karthi, P. (2025). Deconstructing the Mahabharata: A critical analysis of Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Roll of the dice*. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, 13(4), 237–240. <https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.4.237>

- Dirks, N. (2001). *Castes of Mind*. Princeton University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691218281>
- Thapar, R. (2002). *The Past Before Us*. Harvard University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1pncrpb>
- Doniger, W. (2009). *The Hindus*. Penguin.
- Hardy, F. (1983). *Viraha-Bhakti*. Oxford University Press.
- Pollock, S. (2006). *The Language of the Gods*. University of California Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520932029>
- Rao, V. N. (2003). *Textures of Time*. Permanent Black.
- Menon, R. (2012). *Interpreting the Mahabharata*. Oxford.
- Richman, P. (1991). *Many Ramayanas*. University of California Press.
- Hawley, J. (2005). *Three Bhakti Voices*. Oxford.
- Novetzke, C. (2016). *The Quotidian Revolution*. Columbia University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.7312/nove17590>
- Dimock, E. (1989). *The Place of the Hidden Moon*. University of Chicago Press.