



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 5.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

Reinterpretation of Hindu Myths in Contemporary Indian English Literature

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Abstract

Myth has always functioned as a vital cultural resource in India, shaping religious, ethical, and aesthetic traditions across centuries. In contemporary Indian English literature, Hindu myths are not merely preserved but reinterpreted, reshaped, and retold to address the complexities of modern existence. Writers such as R. K. Narayan, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Devdutt Pattanaik, Shashi Tharoor, and Amish Tripathi employ myth as a narrative strategy to interrogate issues of gender, caste, nationalism, and postcolonial identity. Their works transform timeless epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* into new vehicles for cultural dialogue, where ancient stories are reframed in the light of contemporary values and global readerships. This reinterpretation involves three distinct processes: demythologizing canonical texts to highlight human dilemmas, remythologizing narratives to provide alternative perspectives (often feminist or subaltern), and hybridizing myths with modern genres like fantasy or historical fiction. In doing so, Indian English literature bridges tradition with modernity, offering both continuity and innovation. The study demonstrates that myths, when creatively reimagined, continue to provide moral, cultural, and political insights while resisting ossification into static tradition. By analyzing selected texts, this paper reveals how Hindu myths remain a dynamic site of negotiation, sustaining their relevance while fostering critical engagement with contemporary social realities.

Keywords: Hindu myths, Indian English literature, reinterpretation, cultural identity

Introduction

Myths have always served as the backbone of Indian culture, providing not only religious instruction but also shaping literature, art, and social imagination. Among the most influential myths are those derived from Hindu scriptures such as the *Vedas*, *Puranas*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata*. These stories, transmitted orally and textually over millennia, have been reinterpreted in every historical era, adapting themselves to the values and concerns of each age. With the advent of Indian English literature, myth acquired yet another platform for reinvention, becoming a central device through which writers explore questions of identity, morality, gender, and nationhood.

In the colonial and postcolonial contexts, Hindu myths gained particular significance as writers sought to affirm cultural distinctiveness while simultaneously addressing modernity. The mythical framework offered a mode of resistance to Western epistemologies, proving that



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indigenous stories carried universal appeal. R. K. Narayan's *The Ramayana* (1972) and *The Mahabharata* (1978) made epics accessible to English readers, while Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) reconfigured the *Mahabharata* as a political allegory of modern India. These examples illustrate how myth became a dynamic tool, both preserving cultural heritage and questioning contemporary political realities.

Equally crucial has been the feminist reinterpretation of myths. Writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and Kavita Kane in *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013) retell epics from the perspective of women who had been marginalized in the canonical versions. Such narratives not only recover silenced voices but also foreground issues of gender justice and subjectivity. Similarly, Devdutt Pattanaik and Amish Tripathi employ myth in popular fiction, transforming ancient figures into relatable, modern protagonists. Their works illustrate how myths remain a living tradition, constantly reshaped to resonate with contemporary audiences.

Thus, the reinterpretation of Hindu myths in Indian English literature functions on multiple levels: as a cultural bridge between tradition and modernity, as a critique of social hierarchies, and as a creative reimagining of timeless narratives. By analyzing the strategies of demythologization, remythologization, and hybridization, this study will examine how myths continue to thrive as a vibrant narrative resource in contemporary Indian writing.

Theoretical Background of Myth and Reinterpretation

In literary and cultural studies, the concept of myth has been interpreted through diverse frameworks in both Indian and Western traditions. In the Indian context, myth is not regarded as mere fiction or falsehood but as *itihasa* and *purana*—sacred narratives that embody spiritual truths, ethical codes, and cosmic order. Hindu myths from texts like the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Puranas* function as living traditions, continuously retold in rituals, performances, and literature. They are not fixed stories but dynamic resources for moral instruction and cultural continuity. In Western scholarship, however, theorists such as Mircea Eliade and Roland Barthes have offered influential perspectives on myth. Eliade views myth as a sacred narrative that reveals fundamental truths about existence and provides a model for human behavior; myths, for him, are eternal returns to a sacred time of origins. By contrast, Barthes conceptualizes myth as a system of signs, a mode of speech that naturalizes cultural values and ideologies. For Barthes, myths are not divine truths but cultural constructs that shape collective consciousness by presenting historical realities as natural. These two perspectives—Eliade's sacred universality and Barthes's cultural semiotics—provide complementary ways of understanding Hindu myths in literature: they are simultaneously timeless narratives and ideological tools that can be adapted for new socio-political contexts.



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The importance of Hindu myths in shaping cultural identity becomes particularly visible in the context of Indian English literature. Myths such as the trials of Sita, the dilemmas of Arjuna, or the devotion of Hanuman embody ideals of duty, sacrifice, and devotion that have guided Indian society for centuries. They serve as cultural touchstones that define ethical conduct, gender roles, and collective memory. However, in the postcolonial context, reinterpretations of these myths function not only as cultural preservation but also as acts of resistance and reclamation. During colonial rule, Western narratives often dismissed Indian mythology as primitive or irrational. By rewriting and reimagining Hindu myths in English, contemporary Indian authors challenge such dismissals, asserting the intellectual depth and universal relevance of indigenous traditions. Writers like Shashi Tharoor, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Amish Tripathi deploy myth to question colonial historiography, critique modern power structures, and recover marginalized voices—whether of women, lower castes, or dissenting figures silenced in canonical versions. In this way, myths become tools for renegotiating identity, allowing Indian writers to resist cultural erasure while addressing present-day concerns of gender justice, political corruption, and globalization. Thus, the reinterpretation of Hindu myths represents a dialogic process: it affirms tradition while simultaneously reshaping it, ensuring that myths remain vital resources for both cultural identity and social critique in the modern world.

Canonical Re-presentations: Preserving Tradition

One of the earliest and most influential uses of Hindu myths in Indian English literature comes from R. K. Narayan's retellings of the epics. His works *The Ramayana* (1972) and *The Mahabharata* (1978) occupy a special place in the tradition of myth re-presentations. Unlike experimental retellings that challenge or subvert myths, Narayan's purpose was primarily cultural transmission. By translating the epics into accessible English prose, he opened these foundational texts to a global readership, ensuring that non-Indian audiences could appreciate their philosophical and narrative depth. His retellings maintain fidelity to the original Sanskrit texts but simplify language and narrative complexity, making them approachable for modern readers unfamiliar with Indian traditions.

Narayan's project reflects a postcolonial impulse to assert cultural heritage in a language that had been the tool of colonial domination. By retelling the epics in English, he countered colonial dismissals of Indian culture as inferior or backward. At the same time, his approach avoids overt politicization or radical reinterpretation, focusing instead on continuity and preservation. His versions of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* highlight universal themes of duty, sacrifice, and moral conflict while retaining the richness of Indian storytelling. For Indian readers, Narayan's work reassures them of their cultural legacy, while for global audiences, it introduces Hindu myths as literature of equal stature to Homer's *Iliad* or Virgil's *Aeneid*.



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Narayan's retellings thus embody myth as a continuity of heritage—bridging the gap between Sanskrit traditions and English readership, between ancient narratives and modern sensibilities. They demonstrate how myths can survive in translation without losing their essence, preserving their role as moral and cultural guidebooks while affirming their global literary value.

Political Allegories and National Identity

A striking example of myth as political allegory is Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), which reimagines the *Mahabharata* as a satirical narrative of modern Indian politics. Tharoor overlays characters from the epic with political leaders of twentieth-century India—Dhritarashtra with Nehru, Gandhi with Bhishma, Indira Gandhi with Duryodhana—to expose corruption, hypocrisy, and the failures of post-independence governance. By mapping epic narratives onto historical events like the freedom struggle, the Emergency, and the rise of democracy, Tharoor critiques the political elite while engaging readers with humor and irony.

The interplay between myth and history in this novel illustrates how Hindu myths can serve as a postcolonial tool of nation-building. While colonial discourse often marginalized Indian traditions, Tharoor appropriates myth to narrate India's modern story in its own idiom. His parody demonstrates that myths are not inert relics but active discourses capable of shaping national identity and critiquing contemporary power structures. Myth here becomes a mirror in which the contradictions of democracy, corruption, and leadership are reflected and questioned.

By satirizing both epic heroes and modern leaders, Tharoor challenges idealized notions of authority and exposes the gap between ethical ideals and political reality. His work shows that the *Mahabharata*, with its themes of duty, war, and morality, remains relevant to understanding modern governance. In this way, myth becomes both a cultural resource and a political weapon, asserting continuity while enabling critique.

Feminist Reinterpretations

A major trend in contemporary Indian English literature is the feminist reinterpretation of Hindu myths, particularly the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Traditionally, women characters like Sita, Draupadi, and Uruvi have been portrayed in subordinate or marginal roles, often idealized as symbols of chastity and sacrifice. Modern writers challenge these portrayals by retelling the epics from female perspectives, reclaiming silenced voices.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) retells the *Mahabharata* from the viewpoint of Draupadi, presenting her not merely as a pawn in patriarchal politics but as an intelligent, ambitious, and emotionally complex woman. Divakaruni gives Draupadi agency, exploring her desires, resentments, and inner conflicts, thereby humanizing her beyond the archetype of the long-suffering wife. Similarly, Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013) centers on Uruvi, a little-known character, offering a female perspective on Karna's struggles and the injustices of caste and gender hierarchies. Through Uruvi, Kane



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critiques both patriarchal oppression and rigid social norms, highlighting the intersections of gender and caste.

These feminist reinterpretations perform an act of revisioning—they do not reject the epics but reframe them to highlight women's subjectivity. By doing so, they critique patriarchal biases embedded in traditional narratives and provide readers with alternative models of female strength and agency. They also resonate with contemporary struggles for gender justice, making ancient myths relevant to ongoing social debates.

Popular Reimaginings and Mass Appeal

While some reinterpretations are academic or critical, others aim for popular appeal, democratizing Hindu myths for mass readership. Writers like Devdutt Pattanaik and Amish Tripathi have played key roles in this movement.

Devdutt Pattanaik, through works like *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010), simplifies complex mythological narratives for contemporary audiences. His accessible style, enriched with illustrations and cultural commentary, makes the epics engaging for both Indian and global readers. Pattanaik often interprets myths through comparative analysis, linking them with modern psychology, management, and social life, showing how timeless lessons apply to contemporary contexts.

Amish Tripathi, in his *Shiva Trilogy* (2010–2013), blends myth with fantasy, recasting Lord Shiva as a mortal hero who attains divinity through his deeds. Tripathi's narrative style—fast-paced, cinematic, and infused with modern dialogue—appeals especially to younger readers. His works transform myth into a **popular genre**, comparable to fantasy sagas like Tolkien's or Rowling's, but rooted firmly in Indian cultural soil. By fictionalizing and humanizing mythic figures, Tripathi makes them relatable, while also reintroducing mythological themes to a generation increasingly distanced from classical texts. These popular reimaginings ensure that Hindu myths remain culturally vibrant and commercially viable. They democratize mythology, moving it from elite or religious contexts into mainstream entertainment while preserving its core values. In doing so, they demonstrate that myths continue to evolve, finding new life in the creative imaginations of contemporary writers.

Conclusion

The reinterpretation of Hindu myths in contemporary Indian English literature demonstrates the extraordinary adaptability and vitality of myth as a cultural and literary resource, affirming its enduring relevance in shaping individual consciousness and collective identity. Myths in the Indian context have never been static relics of the past but living traditions that continue to be retold and reimagined, finding new expressions across oral, performative, and literary cultures. What Indian English writers achieve is the creative negotiation of these age-old narratives in ways that both preserve their sacred essence and transform their meanings to respond to modern



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realities. Writers such as R. K. Narayan emphasize cultural transmission and continuity, retelling the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in simplified prose to make them accessible to English-speaking audiences while affirming their moral and philosophical universality. Shashi Tharoor takes a more subversive approach in *The Great Indian Novel*, using the *Mahabharata* as a political allegory to expose the flaws of Indian democracy, corruption, and postcolonial leadership, thereby showing that myth can be a powerful instrument of satire and nation-building. On another level, feminist authors like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kane radically reframe canonical epics by foregrounding silenced female voices such as Draupadi and Uruvi, challenging patriarchal frameworks and providing alternative visions of strength, agency, and justice. Their works highlight the possibility of myth as a tool for gender critique, demonstrating how reinterpretations can uncover suppressed subjectivities while keeping the cultural framework intact. Parallel to these literary interventions, popular reimaginings by Devdutt Pattanaik and Amish Tripathi expand the reach of myths by blending them with modern genres such as illustration, fantasy, and mass-market fiction, democratizing mythological knowledge and ensuring its appeal to younger and globalized readers. Collectively, these reinterpretations illustrate three major strategies: demythologization, which humanizes myths by focusing on moral and political dilemmas; remythologization, which reshapes the narratives by offering new perspectives, especially feminist or subaltern; and hybridization, which merges myth with modern literary forms to create new narrative possibilities. The postcolonial dimension of this reinterpretation further highlights myth's role as an act of resistance against colonial denigration of Indian traditions, allowing Indian writers to reclaim cultural pride while also engaging in self-critique. At the same time, these narratives demonstrate the global relevance of Hindu myths, showing how ancient Indian stories address universal questions of duty, morality, justice, and identity. In the twenty-first century, when globalization and cultural homogenization threaten local traditions, the reworking of Hindu myths in English provides both a continuity of heritage and a dynamic space for innovation, ensuring that these epics remain meaningful in negotiating contemporary challenges such as political corruption, gender inequality, consumerism, and ecological crises. Ultimately, the reinterpretation of Hindu myths underscores that literature is not merely a mirror of tradition but a transformative force that continually redefines cultural memory, ethical values, and human aspirations, thereby reaffirming the vitality of myth as a living discourse and a guiding light for navigating the complexities of modern life.



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