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Mythological Retellings as Feminist Revision: Reclaiming Women's Voices in Contemporary Indian Literature

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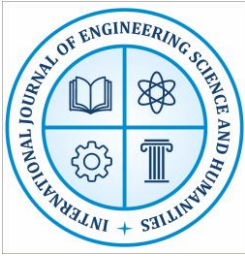
Abstract

There has been a marked change in the portrayal of women in Indian literature in the modern era, particularly reinterpretation of the epic tales using feminist perspective. The paper attempts to analyse the mythological retellings as a feminist revision which takes up the issue of reclaiming the female voices that have been forgotten in *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* and confronting the representation of the female in a patriarchal manner. The study, based on selected works by Chitra Banerji Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, Pratibha Ray and Volga, examines how the characters - Draupadi, Sita, Urmila, Surpanakha and Uruvi - are reconstructed as independent characters with emotional complexity and moral agency. The paper will use a qualitative approach that involves close reading and comparison of texts to examine the process of the transformation of traditional narratives, utilizing feminist literary theory and the revisionist mythmaking process. Specific focus is placed on the narrative voice, the subjectivity of the female and her autonomy, resistance, marriage and the reinterpretation of the pre-existing gender roles. The analysis focuses on the use of alternative viewpoints, the use of reconstructed experience and narrative experimentation by contemporary writers as a way to challenge the authority of male-dominated epic traditions. It also analyses the shortcomings of feminist revision including the continued use of traditional romantic perspectives, expectations, and the lack of a satisfactory treatment of caste marginalised women. The study claims that besides making women's voice visible in narratives, it is imperative to acknowledge their ability to question the established values, and to have an active voice in the narrative.

Keywords: Mythological Retellings, Feminist Revision, Women's Voices, Female Agency, Patriarchy, Indian Literature, Gender Identity, Revisionist Mythmaking.

Introduction

The paper is an analysis of the present day Indian mythological re-telling, as a formal and political entity, not an individual writer. It is intentionally comparative and has English-language novels, English translations of Odia and Telugu works of fiction along with some English translation of scholarship on Bengali, Tamil and Telugu women's telling traditions, which the paper can read not in the original. The method is carried out by identifying four operations (the transfer of voice, the elaboration of interiority, the construction of counter-memory, the filling of narrative gaps),



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and then examining each one of them against particular text instances. This operational model is chosen over a survey by novels due to the fact that it allows for comparison across languages and forms, and because it situates the feminism of the genre in its techniques, rather than in its stated positions. There is a feminist intent, and nothing is delivered in a novel; the methods are more difficult to fake.

There are three restrictions that must be recognized. The first is linguistic: a study of Bengali, Odia, Telugu and Tamil sources would yield a different and more robust stillness to the extent of this new feminism. The second is evidentiary, as the paper's claims around the issues of commerce and devotion are implied as a consequence of patterns in the text and not substantiated by either publishing data or conducting reader research. The third is evaluative; the third paper judges some of these books to be better than others and says so, on the assumption that the genre has arrived at a point of maturity where protective criticism is no longer useful to the genre (Rich 19). A word of caution is also in order with respect to the terminology. Here retelling, revision, appropriation and adaptation are not synonymous, but instead signify the distinctions that Rich, Hutcheon, Sanders and Genette make. Retelling is the general practice; revision is the retelling that shifts the ideological cargo of the source; adaptation is an acknowledged dependence; appropriation is the relocation into a totally new interpretive landscape. The vast majority of the novels discussed are revisionary adaptations. Appropriation is thus approached through Volga's stories, and as suggested below, there is a formal difference which reflects a political one (Genette 5). A challenge of reinterpreting inherited constraints is mirrored in an epigram by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Locked Inside*, in which freedom comes with a shift in perspective.

The world grows wide! A voice—
as if clear words were said— “Your door,
O long imprisonéd, Is locked inside!”
— Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Locked Inside* 4).

Before making any other decisions, every narrative has to make two decisions: What happens and who can say. The Sanskrit epics are very stable in the first and very limited in the second. The story of *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* are familiar to every Indian reader before you even begin your reading of any retelling: the sequence of the events does not change, the position of the voice of the narration does. This shift from the sage to the queen, the assembly to the inner apartment, from dharma to grief is the particular feminist impetus of the genre. The difference is important; otherwise a feminist retelling is just another version of the original story, in which *Sita* goes into the earth, Draupadi is gambled off, Surpanakha is cut off. The objection is based on the wrong form. As Linda Hutcheon says about adaptation as a whole, the fun and the significance come when repetition is made with variation and when the plot is dictated by cultural knowledge the variation must be elsewhere (Hutcheon 4). It is present at the level of narration in the Indian



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mythological retelling. The reader knows what happens, what the novel provides is the experience of what happens from a place that the tradition has never been.

This paper considers that displacement as a serious literary and political act and throws light on it through the following four headings: voice, interiority, counter-memory and the unnarrated. It places contemporary novels in a long, mostly non-English history of rewriting the novel as a woman-centred genre of rewriting; it outlines the theoretical terms at its disposal for understanding revision; and it ends by evaluating the limits of that genre, including its complicity with the pressures of the market and the majority. The most significant single study in the field of Indian epic variation is A. K. Ramanujan's essay on the three hundred *Ramayanas*, where he claims that *The Ramayana* was never a set of fixed scriptures in which geographical variations in form and content are acceptable but must not be allowed to impede the interpretation of the main and consistent text (Hutcheon 4). Everyone's story is a story; Valmiki just one of many. The essay is recorded in Paula Richman's volume, which outlines the varying forms and interpretations of the tradition in Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Thai, Jain and Buddhist versions and shows that some traditions in the tradition already emphasize *Sita's* experience rather than Rama's dharma (Richman 21). In this area, there exists an independent and old line of female storytelling. Chandrabati, on the other hand, is the work of the 16th century Bengali poet Nabaneeta Dev Sen, which brings back a tradition where *The Ramayana* is presented as the woman's woe, as opposed to the king's triumph, and where *Sita's* exile, not Rama's coronation, is the emotional pivot. Molla, meanwhile, is the work of the 16th century Telugu potter-poet. In the ritual songs of Bengal, Maharashtra andhra, Uttar Pradesh, there are critical songs which are *Sita*-centred, in which *Sita* reproaches Rama in his face, in songs sung at weddings to warn the bride of marriage, in songs in which the fire ordeal is not regarded as a proof but as an atrocity (Ramanujan 49). This strand of argument is essential to an understanding of Madhu Kishwar's fieldwork-based argument on the continuing popularity of *Sita*. Her argument is that Indian women's love for *Sita* is not a sign of internalised subordination, but rather is a complicated evaluative process, where *Sita's* behavior is interpreted as more moral than Rama's, and where Rama's behavior is tacitly condemned.

If the retelling is the pre-literate stage, that is, before the advent of print, then it was already being acted in the oral medium well before it was put into print. What contemporary novelists are doing is not developing a novel tradition, it is translating a novel tradition into English and into the form of novel goods (Kishwar 31). It is the same with *The Mahabharata*. In the ethnography of the Draupadi cult of Tamil Nadu, Alf Hiltebeitel records a devotional life that worships Draupadi's wrath rather than her compassion. The folk Draupadi is terrible. Therefore, her fierceness is rediscovered in literature, as Odia *Yajnaseni* by Pratibha Ray and the more recent *Palace of Illusions* by Divakaruni, rather than invented (Rich 19). It is important to acknowledge this genealogy, for two reasons. It guards the modern novels from allegations of illegitimate tampering,



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as tampering is the tradition. It keeps the English-language novel from claiming an originality that is rightfully Bengali, Telugu, Odia, Tamil and Marathi women's, which is what a critical justice like that of Meenakshi Mukherjee would require (203). The survival of mythological stories through the female narrator is also portrayed in Toru Dutt's poem on the epic heroine Sita, which depicts a mother's song as a narrative of the epic heroine.

The term was founded in Adrienne Rich's essay of 1972. Re-vision, for Rich, is "the process of seeing an inherited text again from a different critical perspective," seeing it "from an angle that is not the one established by the author". She states that for women re-visioning is not an academic task, but rather a "condition of survival" because a woman who accepts the inherited text accepts an account of herself written by others (Rich 21). In her specific poetics of myth, Alicia Ostriker interprets it. The woman writer who appropriates mythic material is a thief, in her account: She can't invent her own private mythology, because a private mythology has no cultural authority; she must steal it from the public and change it from the inside (Ostriker 90). This is the exact formula of the Indian retelling. A novel about an invented queen in an invented kingdom would have no sales, a novel about Draupadi would go to a field of meaning already filled with authority and any change would mark an argument. Adaptation studies are the source of formal vocabulary. *The Forest of Enchantments* and Valmiki are precisely characterized as hypertext and hypotext by Gerard Genette. Julie Sanders' distinction between adaptation (which admits its reliance on the source) and appropriation (which moves the material to a new domain) helps draw the lines within the Indian field: Divakaruni adapts, Volga - the woman who rejects Sita's identity as wife and reconstructs it through the experiences of other rejected women - approaches appropriation.

Re-visionary fiction as writing back to a canonical text, changing its ideology without giving up the reader's knowledge of it, demands double motion from the reader of these novels (Sanders 26). Liedeke Plate's work on rewriting on women is the most directly relevant to the specific question of memory, as she maintains that rewriting is a form of cultural memory that challenges what is remembered and the means through which remembering is organised. This formulation is helpful because it shifts the focus away from the fruitless discussion of fidelity and focuses on the question of transmission: who passes on what? Add a formalist reading, and the feminist theory of India will provide the needed correction. A retelling that does not investigate the caste system but liberates a Kshatriya queen will have performed a partial operation, as Uma Chakravarti has shown, patriarchy in early India was constitutively mired in caste. Chandra Talpade Mohanty points to the homogenized third-world woman as a warning to not interpret these novels through an unaltered Euro-American feminist frame (93). The most pointed question that can be posed to it is addressed by Gayatri Spivak's discussion of the structural inaudibility of the subaltern, the question of whether to give a voice to a queen does anything at all for the women whose subalternity is not defined by gender alone but by caste and labour. The first and most obvious one



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is the narration transfer. *The Mahabharata* is a multi-layered frame, from Vyasa to Vaisampayana, Ugrasravas to the sages, all the roles of narrator are male, and therefore the frame of assessment is male, even though it is a female experience that is being recounted.

Divakaruni has written *The Palace of Illusions* from Panchaali's own point of view, undoing all that. The result isn't just tonal. Because the narrator is only the one who gives the reader the information that is "unmediated," the narration's judgments become the assessment, and not the subject of the assessment, as is the case with Yudhishtira's dharmic reasoning (Mohanty 88). *The Forest of Enchantments* is an extension of the method and its central claim is contained in its premise: *The Ramayana* as received is Rama's story, and Sita's account would be a different book. In Odia, Ray's Yajanaseni had conducted a similar procedure years before, albeit in a devotional vein; Piety toward Krishna is not as complicated in Ray as it is in Divakaruni. Kane's "most common" perspective is the close third-person view, where intimacy is replaced by the range of argumentation (Cixous 886).

The second act relates to the elaboration of inner life. Even the epics convey women's emotions sparingly, often in terms of how they affect someone, such as Gandhari's curse, or Draupadi's oath and her concealment. The retellings reverse the proportion. Uncertainty, hesitation, suspicion, lust, pain, and the growing anger and resentment dominate the foreground. This is what the body is all about. The epic register of menstruation, childbirth, ageing and disfigurement is largely absent, except as ritual or insult, and becomes narrated experience. This strand, although not always successful, is the goal or desire to inscribe the female body into language: Helene Cixous's call for a writing that inscribes the female body into language (886). The most obvious example is Kane's *Lanka's Princess*, which presents a reconstruction of Surpanakha's life both before and after her mutilation, making the experience of her body available for violence a study of the woman's body placed outside the realm of respectability (Plate 93). The third act is a retrospective judgement. Most of these novels are told from a point after the events have occurred, meaning that each scene can be overshadowed by the knowledge of what will happen later and, importantly, the narrator can give his opinion on the events. How Panchaali narrates the Kurukshetra war on the other side of the battlefield separates the men from their sense of being called upon by dharma and replaces it with a woman's sense of responsibility to reckon with its costs.

This is counter-memory in the sense of Plate: not a different or alternate memory but a challenge of the memory authority which determined what it would mean in the past (Kane 272). The most complete version of this operation is done by Volga's stories. *The Liberation of Sita* is composed in such a way that it brings Sita into dialogue with Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka and Urmila, who the canonical text excluded from memory, and creates an understanding of *The Ramayana* based on this "solidarity of the discarded". The important lesson to be learned and the one that has been forgotten is the structural insight that patriarchy's narratives keep women apart, and placing them



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in a room is an analytical gesture. The fourth act is to interpolate into the gaps in the source. Valmiki and Kane's *Sita's Sister* takes up the time that Urmila has spent for 14 years. Uruvi is not really dug up, but built up. There is no textual evidence of what it means to be in the condition of petrification within the inner experience of Ahalya. But the purist objection — this is invention, and not interpretation — is answered by Ramanujan's framework: there is no authoritative *Ramayana*, the contemporary novelist is in the same position as all the others who have told it before — Kamban, Tulsidas and Chandrabati (Ramanujan 49). The gaps are not arbitrary, what is important to note is that. They invariably drop off where women's experience would have to be told. This seems like a significant omission in a work where a long genealogy and battle listing can fit. But the lack of Urmila's fourteen years is a comment on what is seen as an event. The criteria of narrate ability is thus the very argument of filling the gap.

Thus the gap is filled by making an argument about the criteria of narratability. The Indian English mythological retelling is a commercial category with recognisable conditions of material and analysis that either ignores them or purports to have them as conditions of idealised books. The publishers are Rupa, Westland, HarperCollins India and Penguin Random House India; the price point is geared to appeal to a large domestic audience; the covers are decorative and often romantic; the marketing is targeted at urban educated English speaking women. It is a convenient solution because it is 100% Indian in nature, but 100% global in form; being caught between the need to explain India abroad and to authenticate itself at home is a problem Mukherjee has diagnosed as Indian writing in English, and mythology is easily both of these, as Oliveira says (58).

Three consequences follow. The first is the romance ceiling. The character of the heroine is usually provided and her emotional journey and feminist theme are usually presented within the framework of this. This is why Divakaruni's whole idea of the unsanctioned female desire of Panchaali, attached to the character of Karna, has generated such divergent responses: It is the most radical of the novel's offers of female desire, and it is also the most traditional of things that fall under the genre. The second is the devotional ceiling. For a large proportion of the readership the epics are scripture. It is okay to criticize Rama when he isn't anymore deserving of worship and when he is shown as playing around, he isn't shown as being at fault. This limit has been internalized to such an extent that the genre itself now seems to be an aesthetic choice instead of a commercial limitation (Ostriker 90). The latter is the exceptional-heroine problem. Popular fiction demands the heroine of extraordinary ability, and ends up being a feminism based on extraordinary people. Where there is solidarity, there is friendship.

Volga is the notable exception and it is not a coincidence that Volga writes in Telugu, a form of writing that is explicitly Marxist-feminist political, rather than the market novel. Another question of politics cannot be left unanswered. However, the rise of mythological fiction is tied to an increase of the Hindu majoritarian politics in which the epics serve as the key vocabulary. The



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retellings are ambivalently located. Even as feminist re-vision disrupts the idea of a patriarchy that is frequently cited by the majoritarian readings, so too is the amount of novelistic focus on the Hindu mythic material, alongside the lack of narrative traditions of Muslim, Christian, Dalit and Adivasi women, clearly visible. It is Tanika Sarkar's narration of the Hindu wife's burden with national essence that makes it possible to have these characters speak without making them unchaste (Sarkar 52). To this goes the charge of postfeminism: the novels are the sites of individual empowerment, rather than structural change, which is suitable to the context of consumer culture. The charge is effective. But it is not to be overlooked that these books are circulated in families where an overtly feminist book would not be allowed, and that it is the authority of these epics which carries the argument across the threshold. This is a metaphor to Ostriker's "thief," in a way she didn't mean. As the story unfolds in Divakaruni's *Panchaali*, set after the war, she has a dual role as witness and plaintiff. Because the classical *Mahabharata*'s narrators are not hurt by what they tell, their detachment is provided as a basis of authority. The novel suggests an alternative epistemology – that the one who was acted upon knows something that the observer does not. This is not just a sentimental statement, it is a serious one, and it clearly resonates with the feminist standpoint theory (Kane 272).

The dice game is the test case. The epic is a crisis of dharmic procedure while the novel is an assault from within the assaulted body, and the divine rescue is an obscure mercy that doesn't alter the essential transaction. What the tradition offers as vindication of dharma, the novel offers as proof of its failure, as a system that needs a miracle to keep an atrocity from happening has already shown what it allows. Two strategies for reclaiming Sita are available and the contemporary field divides between them. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni has kept the marriage as the structuring relation and re-reads the journey of Sita back to the earth as a judgement passed on Rama. Volga's stories completely do away with the wifely frame, and rebuild Sita's identity through interactions with Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka and Urmila. The first one brings more value to the role; the second one gets out of it (Ostriker 90). The fact that the more radical text was in Telugu, was in the short-story form, and from an explicitly political feminist formation, is not incidental, and the more accommodating one was in English for an international market. It's a sign of the genre's limitations and not any of the artists' shortcomings. The third approach in Pattanaik's Sita is comparative mythography, a destabilization of the canonical version itself by revealing a myriad of versions. Kane's *Lanka's Princess* is the sharpest act of reclamation the genre offers, as it plays out an episode the tradition tells as mirth. The novel sets up the idea that the mutilation is an act of violence, not a definition of a "person," by assigning the woman a name and a childhood preceding the violence. The analytic benefit is large, and the episode is thus a cautionary example; without classification there would be no violence, for a body first needs to be "out of the category of respectability" for it to be defaced without penalty (Chakravarti 585). This is where the genre



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is closest to the caste analysis it otherwise tries to evade. Chakravarti's telling of Brahmanical patriarchy makes perfect sense of why the rakshasi's desire is legible as monstrous and the same desire is legible as a swayamvara in a Kshatriya princess. The structure is clearly discernible in the plot, but not in the commentary, as in the genre at large, Kane dramatises the mechanism without identifying it. "Much Madness is Divinest Sense" is a poem by Emily Dickinson that illustrates the theme of social classification, conformity and punishment through a parallel example: how dominant social judgements can become grounds for punishment:

In this, as all, prevails. Assent and you are sane;

Demur, you're straightway dangerous and handled with a chain.

— Emily Dickinson, "Much Madness is Divinest Sense").

The greatest evidence for this central claim of gaps is given by Urmila. In a text which has the space to elaborate genealogies and battle catalogues, Valmiki provides a name, a marriage, and fourteen unnarrated years. The omission, then, is a criterion and not an omission. Therefore, the omission is not an oversight, but rather it is a declaration of what constitutes an event. Kane's *Sita's Sister* makes the vacancy a novel and, in the process, suggests that there is structure to waiting, a length and an expense (Kane 272). It's a useful lesson on the challenge of what's being done. To keep a novel Kane alive, one has to keep filling the years with conversation, study and political observation and the waiting is thus less empty than the premise demands. This is an issue of the novel form itself, not just a technical one, as it shows there are limits to the potential of the novel form applied to experiences the form was not created to contain. In fact, the song traditions of women, which express the same content in a different manner (repetition, lamentation) rather than by narrative, might be more appropriate (Dev Sen 20). Finally, the question of the fate of these texts after they have been published should be discussed. The mythological narration has made surprising advances in the Indian universities, being used by students for undergraduate Indian Writing in English papers, for gender studies electives, as well as in research dissertations in the majority of universities. The institutionalization of this genre has implications for its critical reception: a novel that is taught as an example of feminist revision is likely to be read for its thesis, not for how it is written; and the study of a novel whose central theme is a silenced woman can become repetitive: a series of studies that reaffirms for another hundred years that the novel gives voice to a silenced woman. A critical programme more productive would have tackled a number of questions that have not been explored. How do these novels deal with the concept of time and what does their love of retrospective narration close out? What are the connections between the English retelling and the regional-language traditions it references, but is not always calling upon? But how do readers who consider the epics to be scripture read the novel's critique—one that calls for reception research, not textual analysis? But how would a retelling sound without the individual female protagonist at all, substituting it with a group one?



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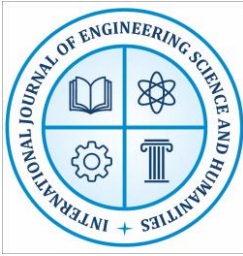
The exciting task over the next ten years will be for writers who discover the conventions stifling and for critics who have the nerve to declare that some of these books are good novels and not just good arguments. One aspect of this field that has not been adequately discussed in the critical literature is its relation to the regional-language traditions from which its material and method have been derived. The women's song traditions that precede nearly every gesture of the modern novel are in Bengali, Marathi, Telugu, Awadhi, and Maithili (Mukherjee 203); Volga's stories were written in Telugu; Chandrabati's *Ramayana* is in Bengali; and Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* was written in Odia in 1984, and first translated into English in 1995. The English novel is, however, the centre of critical focus, and the international reviews, the syllabus inclusions and the prize selections are granted to it. The mechanism is described by Meenakshi Mukherjee's analysis of the asymmetries in literary culture in India – the English-language text as the national text and the bhasha text as the regional text. Such a re-telling of a feminist genre will be replicated in an uncomfortable way as a genre organised around the recovery of suppressed voices has its own voice that has "overwritten" a set of prior voices.

Conclusion

This modern Indian mythological representation restores women's voice by means of four strategically designed interventions: the process of narrating, the process of interiorization, the process of counter-memory, and the process of filling the lacunae in the source text. It is unique in making its claim that a story is not so much defined by the actions which it chronicles but by the point from which the story is told, so that the epics' depiction of women is not a flaw in the story itself but a weakness in the point of view. "Sita" is still going in and out of earth. So, this time, the reader knows that the act isn't a submission, it's a verdict. It's an achievement that shouldn't be overlooked in a genre. It has made the woman-centred style of storytelling popular among the masses of English readers and it has become a tradition of the scholarly community and regional language circles. It has introduced into the realm of narration the interior life of epic women. It has created, for a generation of readers, the habit of asking "who is telling a story and in whose interest?". This is a significant change from the devotional association of women to the epics that had been largely dominant over the past. The boundaries are also true, but also entrenched. The market demands romance; devotion has its limits of critique; the exceptional heroine throws away the question of the systems; and the caste is the biggest blind spot in the genre, a connection that Chakravarti has explored in the Indian context (Chakravarti 585). There is a Kshatriya queen who has a first-person voice that is not in the margins of the text, but there are no women who have been subalternated through caste and labour, no women at all (Spivak 308).

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