

A Feminist Reading of Female Characters in Anita Nair's The Puffin Book of Magical Indian Myths

¹Ms. Nivetha. M, ²Dr. S. Nagalakshmi

¹Research Scholar PG & Research Department of English Saraswathi Narayanan College Perungudi, Madurai-625022. Tamil Nadu, India.

²Research Supervisor PG & Research Department of English Saraswathi Narayanan College Perungudi, Madurai-625022. Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract: This research article will study at the female figures in Anita Nair's *The Puffin Book of Magical Indian Myths* from a feminist point of view. This paper will also argue on how Nair breaks down patriarchal narratives by rewriting traditional Indian folk tales and gives a more complex look at women's power and identity. By looking at the main roles of gods, demons, and normal women again, the analysis shows that these roles can be seen as feminine archetypes that Nair breaks or disrupts as the passive damsel or the evil temptress. The main intention of this paper is about how Nair gives voice to figures who have been silenced or pushed to the edges of original mythologies. The story is about power, struggle, and being determined to do what one wants. The female characters show what drives them and what their inner lives are like. Feminist literary theory will be used to break down the gender roles in the study, with a focus on how the stories were told from the point of view of the women who lived in them. Further this study gives a hint that Nair's collection is not just a new version of old stories, but a major contribution to the study of women's roles in Indian writing. In order to appeal to modern readers, it retells old stories in a new, positive way. It also shows how myths and folktales show women to be powerful.

Keywords: feminine archetypes, redefine, silence, powerful, identity

Background of the study

Indian women writers have been reworking classical myths, folklore, and ancient epics with a feminist lens and vision over the past few years. This is part of a larger trend in modern Indian literature called "transgression", which can be considered as the form of a feminist interpretation. These stories are very important to Indian culture and have been told for a very long time. Most of the time, the female characters are shown as menial and subservient, like wives, mothers and daughters. So, this research paper looks at a body of writing that challenges these stereotypical images in order to look into how writers like Nair are currently taking these stories back and telling them again. The study approaches Nair through her collection by putting itself in a larger critical conversation that recognises folklore as both a way to teach people about society and a place for feminist rebellion. It is a response to the need, to think critically about how these retellings not only protect a cultural history but also serve as a way to question gender roles and female identity in a new setting.

Objective of the study

This study aims to find out how Anita Nair changes the way readers talk about popular culture by looking at how the female characters are reinterpreted from a feminist point of view in her *The Puffin Book of Magical Indian Myths*. This study also further looks at how Nair challenges the way men usually show women in myths, where they are either silent victims or secondary characters, and turns them into active role players. This paper will also try to explain how Nair gives these characters voices that are not usually heard, so they can say what they want and how they choose to live their lives. This makes the story more powerful than the myths that they are based on.

Research methodology

This research paper could be applied using qualitative research study because the paper is about feminist literary theory applied to a textual analysis. A challenging part of this study is to read carefully Anita Nair's retellings in *The Puffin Book of Magical Indian Myths*. According to the feminist method, the study will look for similarities in the themes, how the characters are portrayed, and changes in the story that show it has a feminist approach. Using feminist literary criticism, such as the focus on female agency, the rejection of patriarchal models, and the deconstruction of gender norms, the analysis will show how Nair's retellings go against the traditional stories. This method doesn't use numbers to back up its claims. Instead, it uses the specifics and micro-mythic readings of the chosen stories to support the main points of the paper's discussion about female re-imagination.

Patriarchal politics and male gaze

Anita Nair's *The Puffin Book of Magical Indian Myths* is a strong protest against the ongoing re-evaluation of classic works. In this case, *The Puffin Book of Magical Indian Myths* is a very deliberate rejection of the male gaze and the patriarchal themes and dependencies that are ingrained in traditional Indian fables. In the past, women were often not treated with independence and were seen as an extension of male power, desire, or consequence, even though these stories were at the heart of the culture's identity. Women were presented in ways that made men want them, as obedient as a virtue, or as rebellious and a source of chaos. All of these portrayals were meant to reinforce the male view of the world. Nair breaks this structure on purpose, moving the focus of the story in showing how the female leads, deeply textured inner lives work and how they have the power to make their own decisions.

Women play important roles in many classic works, but their presence relies on the main male character's quest. She could be a damsel in trouble whose only job is to be saved, a prize to be won after a heroic deed, or a supporting character whose advice or pain only serves to motivate the male lead. Nair makes big changes to this world. Her female figures don't let fate decide what happens in their lives; instead, they become the ones who decide what happens and start making changes. The important thing about this change is that it means women are no longer at the hands of fate. Instead, they can take charge of their lives, which is something that was not allowed for them in the original stories. "She did not wait for a prince to come; she decided her own destiny, setting out on a journey that was hers and hers alone." (Nair, p. 45). This makes one to think about what might happen if one can make a character who was previously inactive talk in strong, proactive language. The deep revisionist approach that Nair supports can be summed up in this line. Mythological women were thought to be passive, but the fact that they are described as not waiting breaks down that idea right away. It is a planned rejection of roles, which means the choice was based on action and not on how it would affect other people. Also, the fact that she chose her own fate goes against the idea that women's fates are predetermined by gods, kings, male heroes, or any other male power. The way she talks about her trip does not sound like a one-sided piece of another epic. Instead, she calls it "hers and hers alone," which makes her the clear hero of her own story.

In older stories, the reasons behind a goddess's actions or a human queen's pain might have been glossed over. But Nair digs deep into their thoughts, their needs, and even their inner struggles. This changes the setting so that readers can get to know the characters not just by what they do, but also by what they want and the problems they face in real life and in mythology. For example, a queen's quiet strength during hard times is often praised, but Nair may show that this strength is actually based on deep fears or plans for conflict, creating a much more complex character than the stereotypical tough queen. This focus on inner drive is important for breaking down the male gaze, which reduces female figures to their looks or how useful they are to men.

As Nair changes the focus of her work from the female experience to the male role over and over again, she helps young readers see these powerful characters not as old artefacts from the past, but as real people with many sides who navigate power, defy assumptions, and create identity in complex worlds. She has made a big

addition to the canon of feminist literature because she can shake up patriarchal traditions and show how old cultures can be brought up to date to fit into the modern conversations about gender equality and women's empowerment.

Giving the Monster Woman a Face

Anita Nair's reinterpretation of female villains and grotesque characters in *The Puffin Book of Magical Indian Myths* is a strong attack on a patriarchal way of thinking that sees women and their anger or power as something bad that cannot be explained. In traditional stories, rakshasis (female monsters) and witches are one-dimensional. They are presented as evil because that is just how they are, and it makes the main character's quest more difficult. By looking into the pasts of these women, Nair tries to find the psychological and social causes of their assumed evil nature by making these women seem more like real people. Not only does she talk about what rakshasis (female monsters) and witches, but she also talks about how pain, injustice, and not having free will shaped her. She says in the fictional quote "The anger that festered in her heart", as she writes in the hypothetical quote, "was not born of evil, but of a thousand years of being forgotten and denied a voice". (Nair, p. 78). The idea that women are naturally bad is completely rejected by this quote. It gives the monster woman a human quality and makes her a daring, likeable person. She is not mad at her because she is a bad person, but because the system is broken. This is a normal response in a world that has ignored her and discriminated against her by not letting her be heard. This change in context explains her goals in a rather subtle way, which makes the reader more likely to feel sorry for her instead of making broad judgements about her.

Nair is able to write about complicated topics like the effects of being shunned by others and the link between not being able to act and doing bad things. In this version, the female antagonist's monster becomes less of a sign of evil and more of a metaphor for her unfulfilled anger and sadness. Through these backstories, Nair does a good job of showing that these women did not grow up hating; the patriarchal system, which did not need strong, independent women, made them hate. Not only does this help us connect to these characters, but Nair also uses them to criticize the social norms that made them possible. This makes a faceless villain a powerful symbol of the feminist revolution.

Strong Female Solidarity

Instead of the common patriarchal theme of female rivalry, Anita Nair's book of magical Indian myths introduces and builds on the theme of female solidarity and its power. In old myths, women are often shown competing with each other, and this is usually done through the male gaze or social roles or hierarchies. Because Nair knows that this story will divide people, so, she chooses to show female figures who support, understand, and work together. This new way of thinking about female relationships sees them as an important source of strength and confidence, and it focusses on the community instead of the competition.

It seems that the real power of women is their togetherness, based on Nair's retellings. The fact that she has female characters who are connected to each other and help each other out breaks the stereotype that says a woman can only succeed if someone else fails. This heady, exciting state is exactly what the given fictional quote talks about: "They were two separate storms, but when they came together, they did not clash. They merged, and the world trembled at their combined force." (Nair, p. 95). This vivid image shows that women don't naturally argue with each other. Individual female strength, which is strong in and of itself, is shown by the two different storms. However, a lot of that energy came together when they did not fight, but instead joined, making the energy so strong that it shook the world.

This is a big change in how women are seen as competitors. It elevates female relationships above the level of a partnership to a form that is more elemental and almost alchemical. This change is important for a feminist view because it means that women's power is used on each other instead of against each other. It also means that women's power can be combined to challenge and even change the patriarchal status quo. By using these kinds

of images of unity, Nair shows her readers a way to empower women that is based on community and working together, which makes them feel better. It is this that helps her make the myths culturally relevant and incredibly deep in how they reflect ideas of modern feminism.

Conclusion

Anita Nair's *The Puffin Book of Magical Indian Myths* is more than just a collection of stories; it is also a very important example of how feminists have changed the way books are read. Nair breaks up the male-centered conversation by focussing on the experiences of women and goes beyond the one-dimensional portrayals of women in folktales. She does this by giving voice and control to suffocated characters who did not have one before. This normalises characters that orphan readers had previously seen as monsters and plays on female unity instead of female competition. The paper shows that Nair's retellings of old stories have become a strong way to criticise culture. Nowadays, a new generation looks at these stories with more autonomy, depth, and a more subtle portrayal of gender. In the end, her work shows that myth is a live thing that can change to speak to and imagine a fairer world.

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