Reimagining and Retelling Indian Mythology: A Study of Contemporary Trends with Special Reference to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Feminist Rewriting of the *Ramayana*

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Abstract

Stories have a universal appeal and they fascinate the old and young alike on account of their entertaining as well as educating qualities. While contributing to the greater cause of disseminating knowledge, passing on rituals, traditions and beliefs from generation to generation, stories also communicate plethora of emotions, perspectives and experiences of the story teller to others. Kathy G. Short (2012) affirms that stories "are the way our minds make sense of our lives and the world" (p. 9). Reimagining the old story and retelling it from fresh perspective is a popular trend in contemporary writing and it allows the emanation of the new narratives that voice the hitherto unspoken and hence unheard perspectives of the popular tales. Reimagining and reshaping the age-old myths into new narratives offering fresh perspectives is a novel approach to the readings of mythology and it caters to the needs of the modern readers who seek answers to the present day problems in the familiar narratives. The present study seeks to explore the recent trend of reimagining and retelling Indian mythology in books, movies, and serials. It also aims to analyze feminist retellings of the *Ramayana* with special reference to Divakaruni's work.

Keywords: Mythology, Retellings, Contemporary Trend, Feminist Rewriting, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Introduction:

Mythology refers to a set of myths and mythological tales that condition the thoughts and behaviours of the people pertaining to a particular culture, religion, nation or tradition. Myth is a cultural construct, "a common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together" (Pattanaik, 2006, p. xv). Likewise, mythology, a collection of myths, is "a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances," (Abrams & Harpham, 2009, p. 230). Myths and mythologies exert a profound influence on the culture concerned. "If myth is an idea, mythology is the vehicle of that idea.… From myth comes belief, from mythology customs. Myth conditions thoughts and feelings. Mythology influences behaviours and communications" (Pattannaik, 2006, pp. xv-xvi). Ancient myths and mythologies, passing orally from generation to generation, have been the perpetuators of certain ideologies and have had "the power to influence culture's worldview and belief system" (Pujari & Jani, 2022 p. 2095). Recently a trend of rewriting mythology has come into prevalence and these rewritings either sustain or vehemently question the established narratives. The retellings are blending the old narratives with the new ones to make the myths even more plausible as well as relatable to the present generation.
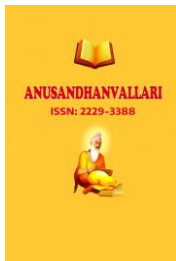
Objectives:

- To explore the relevance of the recent retellings that blend the old mythological tales with contemporary issues.
- To explore the retellings of the Indian mythology with special reference to the audio-visual as well as written retellings of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.
- To explore prominent feminist rewritings of the Indian Mythology in vogue at present.
- To analyze the feminist retelling of *Ramayana* with reference to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest on Enchantments.*

Methodology:

As the qualitative research adds to the comprehension of an event or phenomenon by exploring it in totality, the qualitative approach is used to study the various aspects involving the trend of reimagination and retelling of the Indian mythological tales in diverse forms available at present. Exploratory Design is used to explore how Indian mythology with its constant changing form is in vogue at present. In addition to exploring mythological books, articles, shows, movies and others materials available at present, interviews with the writers retelling mythology at present are used as tool to substantiate the vogue of rewriting mythology in fiction. Theoretical lens of Feminism is used to analyze *The Forest of Enchantments,* a modern retelling of the Ramayana, written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Reimagining and Retelling Mythology: A Trend

There is a constant surge in retellings of the Indian myths and epics in recent times. The modern revisionist writers are reimagining, reinterpreting and revisioning the old narratives and are reshaping them to rewrite new ones. This experimentation with the form of old myths has become quite popular at present and can be noticed in the re-imagination of the Ancient Indian mythological texts the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in the form of new stories, books, comics, movies, animated serials, theatre shows and plays that are blending the old narratives with contemporary issues.

Reimagined and retold myths lead to new myths that possess the writer's ruminations and, hence, these retellings can never be adjudged as mere translations of the popular tales. Bibudhendra Narayan Patnaik(2012) opines about the task of retelling the popular tales in his book *Introducing Saaralaa Mahaabhaarta* as:

> When one tells another's story with some involvement, one feels almost compelled to add a bit of one's own thinking about the aspects of it in some form: comments, observations, interpretations and the like. It is especially so when the story is as comprehensive and profound as Mahabharata and is also one with which one has grown up and which has become a significant part of one's cultural identity. (p. ix)

While mentioning the relevance of rewritings and retellings of the myths Meenakshi Mukherjee (2006) also asserts that the retellings and rewritings should never be misunderstood as mere 'translations' as these rewritings pose creative challenges. Mukherjee asserts, "Even to the novelists of our time, exposed as they are to global influences, reinterpretations of episodes from the epics continue to be a creative challenge. Thus the epic in India do not belong to the past alone- they are also part of the contemporary consciousness" (p. 603).

Mythological tales, although, considered quite rigid in nature, have been reinterpreted and re-imagined by the creative writers across the cultures. Meenakshi Mukherjee (2006) asserts that the oral tales "acquired a number of written versions" (p. 601) after the advent of the printing press and these tales are now passing through diverse mediums such as the printed texts, plays, theatre, television shows, movies, cartoons and games in the
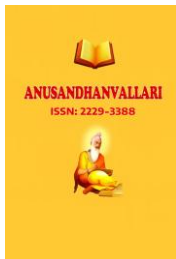
modern technological world. Numerous writers are attempting to change the forms of conventional tales of the mythology in order to address the issues of contemporary times.

Dr. Sabita Mishra (2019) in her research paper "A Modern Approach to Retelling of Indian Epics and Mythical Characters" accentuates on the fact that how the old myths are taking new dimensions after getting added to constantly shifting socio-cultural scenario. Modern writers have opted for varied approaches to observe the old myths, mythical events and mythological character and have tried, "to illustrate the real social situations of the country through reference to such mythologies and epics" (p. 163). Retelling the old myth and rendering it a fresh outlook is a contemporary trend that shapes the myth in a modern frame and ignites the interest of the modern day readers and audience in the mythology. Emphasizing on the recent trend of rewritings, D. W. Mohamed and Donia Gamila (2019) explain that, "borrowing a certain tale or character from ancient mythology, then molding them into a new narrative that appeals to modern day audience, does not only heighten the popularity of mythology, but also contribute in popularizing those certain works of literature" (p. 1).

**Reimagining and Retelling Mythology through the Electronic Media:**

The ancient myths have been reimagined and retold in various forms in contemporary times. Although, myths and mythological studies may be termed by some as irrelevant or obsolete, yet, with the availability of numerous avenues at present, the practice of passing on the mythology is prevalent more today than ever before. After the emergence of the electronic mediums such as radio and television, the myths have been retold in audio and visual forms. The television serial Ramayan made by Ramanand Sagar, aired on television during 1987-1988, was the popular retelling of the *Ramayana*. Similarly the television serial Mahabharat, aired during 1988-1990 was the famous retelling of Maharishi Vyasa's *Mahabharata*.

The latest television series such as Karansangini (2018), Siya ke Ram (2015) and many more that are providing fresh perspectives to the age old narratives of the Indian mythology, are thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated today. In addition to the mythological fiction series that dominate the television sets these days in India, a resurgence of mythological tales for children, with which children can relate, is also visible. In the research paper entitled "Exploring Mythological Themes in Indian Animation Films for Children: A Textual Analysis" Dr. Kanika Arya and Dr. Manish Verma (2024) highlight as "With the growing popularity of animation as a storytelling medium in India, there has been quite an increase in the production of animated films that take inspiration from Indian mythological themes" (p. 61). There are a number of animated retellings of Indian mythological movies like Ramayana: The Epic (2010), Mahabharat (2013), Hanuman (2005) and animated television serials like Little Krishna (2009), Mighty Little Bheem (2019), The Legend of Hanuman (2021) etc. that fascinate the children in our country.

Recent movies like Raavan (2010) draw modern day parallels with the ancient Indian epic Ramayana, wherein a police officer is in search of a tribal leader, Beera Munda who has abducted his wife. The motive of the abduction was to avenge his sister's death at the hands of the local police. Aadipurush (2023) is an example of the retellings that were received unfavourably by the people. Singham Again (2024) draws parallel between the tale of Ramayana and the contemporary issues. Numerous audio-books and audio-series are also available on the mythological retelling at present on Spotify and Pocket FM. Devdutt Pattanaik's show on Radio Mirchi aims at making mythology interesting for the young listeners.

Reimagining and Retelling Mythology through the Fictional Rewritings:

Experimenting with the Indian myths and the mythological genre, the recent rewritings have rendered a fresh and modern outlook to mythology. With each retelling mythology has become a popular genre, garnering a group of avid readers. The recent mythological books have "appealed to mass readers who can now enjoy a story that is at
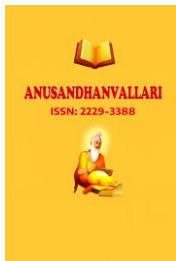
once familiar yet compelling" (Krishna, 2018). Numerous retellings are also written in the regional languages and many are translated from English to regional languages to ensure a greater reach to the regional and non-English readers. Amish Tripathi stresses on this fact in an interview with Swetha Amit and says that the "regional languages are the key to reaching the masses" (Tripathi, 2016).

The modern-day writers as well as the readers have started examining the rationality of the storyline, the plots and the characters portrayed in the mythological tales. Writers like Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanaik, Anand Neelakantan, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, Koral Das Gupta and many more have reinterpreted the Indian epics and have attempted to unearth the mysteries hidden behind the mythical tales by rewriting them. The Shiva Triology, *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* (2015)*Sita :The Warrior of Mithila* (2017)*, Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta (2019),* by Amish Tripathi's; *Jaya*(2010), *Sita*(2013), *The Book of Ram* (2014) by Devdutt Pattanaik are the popular retellings of the Indian mythology. *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You* (2014) by Devdutt Pattanaik is a collection of 30 short stories wherein Pattanaik revisits ancient mythology with a queer eye.

Challenging the hegemonic narratives, the modern writers are reimagining the ancient tales and are reshaping them to form new narratives written from the perspectives of the antagonists of the myths or from the marginalized groups. Anand Neelakantan rewrites the counter-stories for Indian mythology from the perspective of the vanquished. He re-imagines the tales of the acknowledged antagonists of the Indian epics and exhibits the humane and virtuous aspects of these villains.

His novel *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished: The Story of Ravana and His People* (2012) depicts the tale of *Ramayana* from Ravana's viewpoint. In the words of Neelakantan, Ravana is "the epitome of a complete human being; without any pretense to holiness or restricted by social and religious norms. He is as good or bad as any human being, and as nature intended man to be. Society is unable to curb his other nine faces, as it does in the figure of Rama. So Rama may be seen as God, but Ravana is the more complete man. Our epics have used the ten heads of Ravana to symbolize a man without control over his passions- eager to embrace and taste life- all of it" (p. 1). Neelakantan tells the story of Duryodhana in his Ajaya Series that included *Roll of the Dice: Duryodhana's Mahabharata (Ajaya Book 1)* and *Rise of Kali: Duryodhana's Mahabharata (Ajaya Book 2)*.

Feminist Rewritings of Indian Mythology:

At present there is an evident surge of the feminist revisionist rewritings in the genre of mythological fiction. A number of female writers have also reinterpreted and reimagined mythological tales using the feminist lenses and have retold the fresh narratives from the perspective of the female characters of the Indian mythology. For instance: Mahasweta Devi's story *Draupadi* is a contemporary take on the epic tale *Mahabharta* as it highlights the endeavours of a marginalized woman to survive against patriarchy and social hegemony in the modern India. Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The story of Draupadi* is the retelling of the *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Draupadi. Chitra Benarjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantment* (2019) is a retelling of the Ramayana from Sita's perspective and her *The Pallace of Illusion*(2008) is a fresh take on the tale of *Mahabharata* from feminist perspective. Kavita Kane has written the feminist retellings of the mythological tales while reimagining the lives of the mythological females such as Urmila, Meneka, Ahalya, Surupnakha, Tara and Satyawati etc. Likewise Koral Gupta's *Sati Series,* too, reimagines mythology and sheds light on the lesser known facts of the mythological women.

Divakaruni's Feminist Retellings of the Indian Epics:

Renowned writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has also rewritten the classical Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* from fresh perspectives and has rendered new feminist narratives to old patriarchal tales by lending

voice to the outstanding women characters of these epics. These retellings by Divakaruni come out as exceptionally conscious feminist narratives voicing the concerns of women portrayed in the Indian mythology.

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) is a retelling of the *Mahabharata* by Draupadi, an invincible and fearless woman, who fiercely and firmly stands for herself in the midst of man's ferocious world. Divakaruni was "dissatisfied with the portrayal of the women in the epic- the numerous powerful and complex women that affect the action in major ways (p. xv). She was distressed to notice that "all these women remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions described only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons" (p. xv). Therefore, she presents a distinctly feminine point of view to the extremely venerated Indian epic *Mahabharata* by letting Draupadi narrate the events and challanging the androcentric society that always subjugates women.

The Forest of Enchantments: A Feminist Retelling of the *Ramayana*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) is a retelling of the *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective. In this work Sita's voice represents the 'muted' female characters of the Indian mythology. Sita, Urmila, Kaikeyi and Surpnakha are portrayed as "passionate, lustrous and philosophical … take emotional intelligence in their strife for survival and in search of identity in society" (Hazarika, 2014, p. 296).

In mythology, Sita has always been adjudged as an ideal wife who followed her husband to exile. Geeta Chandran and others assert in the research paper "Re-imagining Sita in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantment" as, "Sita is often viewed as an extension of Lord Ram, but not an an aspired individual with vision" (Chandran et al., 2022 pp. 64-65). But Divakaruni's retelling focuses on Sita as an individual with her own identity who takes stand not only for herself but for other women as well. Sita, although, regarded as a goddess herself, was forced to go through the fire test twice in order to prove her innocence since her husband Rama, the just ruler was more concerned about what the people of his kingdom thought. In sheer distress and desperation at her husband's demand for a fire test, Sita remarks:

> You who care so much about the citizens of Ayodha, did you think of the impact your actions would have on the women of the city? That men would punish their wives harshly or even discard them for the smallest refractions saying King Rama did so, then why shouldn't I?" (Divakaruni, 2019, p. 356)

Sita refuses the consolation prize being given to her at the expense of performing the fire test in the courtroom of Ayodhya. She turns down the offer of living with her husband and children after going through the fire test. Sita rejects the temptation offered to her by patriarchy in order to maintain the male hegemony and prefers to eventually go back to the lap of mother-nature where she will not be asked to prove her sanctity anymore. She acknowledges the urgency of time to stand up in solidarity with all women. "Because this is one of those times when a woman must stand up and say, NO MORE!"(Divakaruni, 2019, p. 357). She explains the reason for this resolute action as:

> If I do what you demand, society will use my action forever after to judge other women. Even when they are'nt guilty, the burden of proving their innocence will fall on them. And society will say, why not? Even Queen Sita went through it. I can't do that to them. (p. 356)

Another befitting example of the male dominance to convince women to abide by the norms set by the patriarchal society was the Lakshman Rekha drawn by her outraged brother- in- law Lakshman within which she was asked to stay. The crossing of the line by Sita suggested that she had crossed the limits assigned to her by the patriarchal society and this resulted in her abduction by the demon king Ravana.
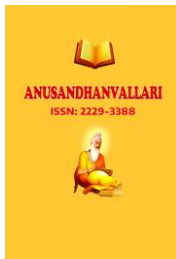
The misogynist aspect of the patriarchal worldview finds a thorough expression in Divakaruni's retelling when the retelling highlights how women had to suffer on account of the patriarchal structure. Sita falls prey to the stringent norms of patriarchy when her husband, King Ram, abandons her without letting her explain anything. In light of the denigration of Sita being done by the males of his kingdom, Ram decides to banish Sita even when she was pregnant "…..And how about our wives? They're going to start expecting the same kind of submissive behavior from us. They'll be doing whatever they want, going wherever they want" (Divakaruni, 2019, p. 314). Sita decides to liberate herself from the shallow norms of patriarchy that glorifies women who live strictly according to its standards. Her desperate passion for self-liberation is reflected through her act of returning eternally back to the earth whereof she was born.

Future Scope: The present study has tried to exhibit how the Hindu mythological texts especially the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have been reimagined and retold in various forms evolving a contemporary trend worldwide. Yet, there are many other issues related to the Indian mythology which can be taken up by researchers in their future endeavours. Do the recent reinterpretations and retellings enhance the cultural pride or do they create cultural rift? Do they contribute to the political and religious tensions or otherwise? Moreover, it can also be studied as why do the original as well as these retellings succeed in captivating and inspiring people even today.

Conclusion:

The research endeavour has highlighted as how the classical tales have been reframed by applying the innovative approaches and how these tales are retold in books, movies and digital media by introducing novel characters, elements and settings at present. The contemporary retellings of the Indian mythology have blended tradition with the present socio-political scenario. The modern retellings have shifted the focus from the grand narratives to the individual lives, struggles and journeys of the mythological characters making them more humane and relatable. Divakaruni's retelling, *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), explores the study using the feminist theory, also highlights on the aspects of Sita's life from her own viewpoint and eventually she appears as a very endearing character. To conclude, the study highlights how the recent retellings accentuate the broader aspects of mythological tales and kindle the interest of modern public in mythology while also unraveling the burning problems of the contemporary society.

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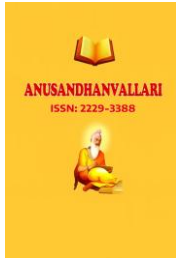
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