

Rewriting Gender Roles: Feminist Reinterpretation of Mythological*

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Abstract

Mythological stories form the basis of many cultures as they are passed down through generations, serving as a means of conveying values, beliefs and traditions. Mythological tales generally idolize and glorify male prowess. Gender inequality in mythology is a complex issue which is embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of our Indian society. This representation often mirrors the gender disparity in our lives as well. These narratives frequently portray women in subordinate roles which directly reflects the patriarchal norms prevalent in the society. Revisionist mythology takes these ancient tales and caters them to the modern readers by reinterpreting them. One of the prevalent themes of the revisionist mythology is the point of view of a female character which helps the reader in understanding the situation of females in the ancient time. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kane, through their revisionist mythological novels, provide a new outlook on traditional narratives that challenges the existing gender bias and creates a platform for female empowerment in mythological retellings. The paper discusses and argues that the modern retellings have formulated a progressive female-centered discourse by breaking the ideological male canon and also aims to delve into the gynocentric myth these women writers have created.

Keywords: Mythology, Revisionist Mythology, Culture, Gender Inequality, Gynocentric

Introduction

Myths are stories that form the basis of many cultures. They shape the way a society thinks and acts. Different rituals are attached to myths, and they validate the cultural practices of people. Mircea Eliade, Romanian historian, in his work *Myth and Reality* says, "... "myth" means a "true story" and, beyond that, a story that is a most precious possession because it is sacred, exemplary, significant" (1). Myths have their unique association with religion and hence they gain sanctity which lavishes them with more power. The discourse that the myths promote often becomes ultimate reality, dictating every aspect of human existence and provides meaning and significance to their life.

Myths were initially transmitted orally from one generation to another, later they were written. Hence, myths have found expression in the scriptures, classical literature and many subsequent works that were based on these myths. Literature often shows the reality of life, its themes cover almost every facet of human life, including myths. The revision of myths, like the several versions of our grand epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, has been taking place for a long time but the tradition of retelling of the story about a particular character, mainly woman, with a new perspective from mythical stories has become more popular in the current age. In recent times, writers are undertaking the task of rewriting old myths to especially focus on viewpoints that have always remained overlooked. The act of revisionism helps in understanding the inconspicuous facets of familiar myths thus making them clearer. Jean-Pierre Mileur in the introduction to his book *Literary Revisionism and the Burden of Modernity* writes, "...revisionism, however radical it may appear to be, is grounded in an

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intensely conservative attempt to defend the tradition from the consequences of its shortcomings” (5).

Feminists believe that myths are male-centric for they glorify male prowess and either stereotype or ignore women. Myths aid in spreading the socially constructed fact that women are meek, submissive, silent, ignorant, indecisive and incapable or they are evil, guileful, sly, beguiling and temptresses. Such portrayal establishes them as secondary or inferior in the society. Myths form an essential part of religion and thus its repetition makes these opinions the ultimate truth. A woman isn't defined by herself but by these myths. Myths provide certain gender traits or essence to women, and they need to adhere to these roles in order to fit in the society. Nivedita Menon in her work *Seeing Like a Feminist* argued that the process of gendering denotes, “... the ways in which people are produced as ‘proper’ men and women through rules and regulations of different sorts; some of which we internalize, some of which have to be violently enforced” (ix).

Feminists infer that myths have evidently established a patriarchal ideology which resulted in the subordination and subjugation of women. They strongly wish to subvert, review and also revise the myths that have treated women as inferior for so long. They attempt to rewrite the androcentric myth in the form of gynocentric retellings to replace the image of women as feeble and subservient. The women of these retellings are strong, independent and smart, not on the periphery but at the central position. Instead of a male outlook, where women's identity was based on men's relation to them, these writers depict women from a gynocentric point of view where they take into account the female sentiment, their experiences and perspective. As Simone De Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* states, “... man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to him; she is not considered an autonomous being” (26).

Feminist revisionists retell myths from a female point of view as myths were predominantly male-centric. After realising the relevance of myths in actualising a certain ideology they began revising the myth which were dominated by patriarchal doctrines and then provided a new gynocentric substitute. The feminist revisionists have revised myths that were androcentric, and liberated the female characters from their stereotypical images, brought the marginalised to the centre and the ignored ones to limelight. Thus, they bestowed recognition upon them. The feminist literature that revises the myth from female perspective is known as feminist revisionist mythology. Alicia Ostriker in her article “The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking” says feminist revisionist mythology, at its core is “... the challenge to and correction of gender stereotype embodied in myth, revisionism in its simplest form consists of hit-and-run attacks on familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them” (74). It employs feminist theory or feminist literary criticism for renewing the myths. Feminist criticism, as defined by Lois Tyson in her work *Critical Theory Today*, “... examines the way in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” (83).

The revisionism of myth from the standpoint of women developed in the early decades of 21st century in Indian English writings. Writers through their works, like *Sita's Ramayana* by Samhita Arni (2011), Aditi Banerjee's *The Curse of Gandhari* (2019), Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana* (2013), Madhavi S. Mahadevan's *The Kaunteyas* (2016), Amish Tripathi's *Sita: The Warrior of Mithila* (2017), Ananda Neelakantan's *Shanta: The Story of Rama's Sister* (2017) and Anuja Chandramouli's *Shakti: The Divine Feminine* (2015) and

Ganga: The Constant Goddess (2018) seem to have successfully revised some of the Indian mythological tales taking a feminist point-of-view.

Two such Indian writers who have provided a centre stage to the disregarded, neglected and disparaged mythical female characters are Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kane. Chitra Banerjee, who is a writer of Indian descent based in America, has written *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) from Draupadi's perspective and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) from Sita's perspective. Kavita Kane, an Indian writer and former journalist, has written *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2014) through Urvi's perspective, who is Karna's fictitious wife, *Sita's Sister* (2014) through Urmila's point of view, *Menaka's Choice* (2015) from the perspective of Menaka the celestial nymph, *Lanka's Princess* (2017) from Surpanakha's perspective, *The Fisher Queens's Dynasty* from Satyawati's point of view, *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019) from Ahalya's perspective, *Sarasvati's Gift* (2023) from Sarasvati's point of view and the most recent work *Tara's Truce* from Tara's perspective.

Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are revered as holy texts. Several stories or instances from these epics are taken to teach morals to people. Also, in forming a certain stereotype these epics play a crucial role as these have been written in an ancient time by a male author. Simone De Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* summarizes the effect of patriarchal mythology as, "... if the definition (of feminine) given is contradicted by the behavior of real flesh-and-blood women, it is women who is wrong: it is said not that Femininity is an entity but that women are not feminine. Experiential denials cannot do anything against myth" (315).

Women have always been seen as marginalised despite their pivotal role in the society. This is said to be the consequence of patriarchal model of our society, however it cannot be blamed entirely on patriarchy as the continual selective projection of certain morals and culture is responsible equally for the discrimination against women. In mythology women have been given a secondary status, created for the male body. As a result of these ambiguous portrayal of women in mythology, writers have tried to revise and reinterpret these myths. Divakaruni and Kane have ostensibly written the mythology from a female point of view. Their version of the story is largely canonical i.e. their stories do not contradict the events recorded in the epics, rather they weave it around the same events present in the epics.

Myths and archetypes are the vehicles through which Divakaruni and Kane convey and present reality. Within the concept of feminist revisionist mythology, they use the mythical metaphors, symbols and archetypes to enter the subconscious and conscious mind of the readers thereby carefully amalgamating the dual experiences in a fresh mode of expression and a modern myth. They address the myriad sources of power that have had a significant effect on the identity of women i.e. a destructor, a passive character or a temptress. They have approached the question of female sexuality and power from a new angle. They have given the female characters individuality not only on a physical level but also spiritual.

During the process of revisioning the myths, the writers endeavour to uncover various hidden voices and experiences in the texts, and this process correlates with the creation of new female identity outside of the mythological canon which was initiated by an eminently patriarchal society. Hence, the process of revision is strongly needed to present a new interpretation of mythology. It questions the text and the value it conveyed. Alicia Ostriker's article "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking" defines revisionist myth-

making as, “Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible” (72).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel *The Palace of Illusions* has Draupadi as the central character. In the epic *Mahabharata* she has an important role. Divakaruni’s novel paints her character as a powerful woman who doesn’t shy away from questioning every confinement made by the patriarchal world. She firmly questions the gender stereotype as well. An instance in the novel where Dhri’s teacher advises him about the highest purpose of a woman’s life, he teaches that it is to assist the warriors who are associated with her which includes her father, brother, husband and sons, with absolute distaste she asks, “...who decided that a woman’s highest purpose was to support men? A man, I would wager! Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life” (26). Her father king Drupad named her Draupadi which only meant that she was the daughter of king Draupad. It was a decision made without putting any thoughts. In the novel she rejected the name and claimed her identity and her independence by addressing herself ‘Panchaali’. She isn’t just a catalyst or initiator of the war rather a victim herself of the patriarchal traditions. She strives to unshackle herself from the confinements established by male dominance. She shows her disliking of Kunti’s decisions of making her the wife of the five Pandavas, “...I had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when. Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not” (120). When given the boon of virginity, she questions whether the boon was for her or for husbands’ benefit. Had she been asked she would have chosen the boon of forgetting but in a patriarchal society she had to be satisfied with whatever she received. By revising the epic through Draupadi’s perspective Divakaruni has thrown light on various aspects of Draupadi’s life which were unknown to many, and which played a crucial role in her decision making and affecting the point of view of the readers.

Divakaruni’s *The Forest of Enchantments* revives Sita from the Ramayana. A woman who is known for her devotion since ages. Her honesty, meekness, chastity and faithfulness are the only aspect of her character that are referred by people. Her struggle, her pain and her side of the story is mostly unknown. The novel which refers itself as *Sitayana* explores the life of Sita right from her birth to her death. It is her side of the story where she becomes the central character giving a space to a woman well known to many, yet quite unknown. She was a child found by King Janak of Mithila and he accepted her as his daughter. King Janak was known to be a lover of literature and art, and he despised violence of any kind. The kingdom was run by his wife Sunaina, who finds little to no mention in the epic. She trained Sita in various ways and taught her lessons. Ayodhya, on the other hand, was a male dominated place where Sita had to struggle to make her place. In the novel after rescuing her from Lanka, when Ram asks her to go wherever she pleases, she herself asks Lakshman to prepare a pier for herself and comes unscalded out of it. It wasn’t to prove her chastity but rather she did it because she was heartbroken after listening to her husband’s command. Later, when she was asked to prove her chastity in front of the courtiers by going through *agnipariksha* she refused saying, “You who care so much about the citizens of Ayodhya, 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 Ram did so. Then why shouldn’t I?*” (Divakaruni 356). In the novel Sita is held in exalted esteem not for her obedience or

meekness but rather for her firmness to protest the injustice against women at that time. She teaches her sons to respect women and hence tries to prevent others from the same fate as hers. She says, “I’ll teach you what you need to know to be good human beings, so that you’ll never do to a woman what your father has done to me” (Divakaruni 317).

Kavita Kane’s novel *Lanka’s Princess* follows the life of Ravan’s sister Meenakshi also known as Surpanakha, a demoness, a temptress. In the *Ramayana* she is portrayed as a woman who is unacceptable female archetype and against the norms of dharma. She is shown as the embodiment of sexual deviance whose character shows that what happens when women cross their culturally set boundaries. In Ralph T. H. Griffith’s *Ramayan of Valmiki*, which is a translation of Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, the mutilation of Surpankha is described as: “Deep cut on Surpanakha’s face: A hideous giantess who came Burning for him with lawless flame.” (37)

She is seen as a subversive woman opposite to the submissive woman like Sita. In the novel, Kane has given Surpankha a proper space and gives reason on how she became a demoness loathed by all. Her childhood trauma, her husband Vidyujiva’s death, her brother’s betrayal, her son Sambhukumar’s death and her mutilation’s effect on her are aptly shown in the novel. She had an identity other than being a temptress, her life struggles made her bitter towards the world. Her resort to take revenge on her brother Ravan led to taking part in the abduction of Sita. Kane, by mediating a feminine sensibility, seems to spurn the mainstream portrayal of Surpanakha’s tale. Her novel depicts Surpanakha’s journey from marginalisation to realisation assisted with her perspective. The novel calls readers attention to the complex psychological and difficult processes experienced by Meenakshi (Surpanakha) from an early age. Born as a beautiful princess, though dark in colour, she had to go through enough heart-wrenching episodes in her life that turned her into Surpankha from Meenakshi.

Kavita Kane’s *The Fisher Queen’s Dynasty* is a reimagining of the *Mahabharata* from Satyavati’s point of view. She is revered as the grand matriarch of Kuru dynasty. Satyavati, a girl of royal descent was forced to live a life of a lower caste woman. Satyavati in the novel represents authority and extraordinary involvement in the society. Her first born grew up to become the famous Maharishi Vyasa. She turned her life in a moment by using her cleverness asking for boons from Rishi Parashar which ultimately helped her in getting King Shantanu’s attention. Although Satyavati shows her feminine responsiveness at the same time, she strives to be rational and logical, thus masculine in her way of using her power. She marries Shantanu as she was fed up of poverty and the victimization in the society, “I learnt about the ways of men... I learnt to love like a man— to love without feelings” (Kane 42). She justifies her seduction of Shantanu as, “some would deem it immoral, but virtue was a quality invented by men to suit their needs. If men could use women, why couldn’t it be the other way round? Sex and beauty were the weapons of seduction that she could, and had, wielded in conflict and contest” (Kane 100). To keep the throne protected for her progeny she asked Shantanu’s son Devrat to take an oath that he would never try to usurp the throne from her children and showed her protective nature as a mother. Her various disastrous decisions led to the fall of the grand dynasty, but her actions were justified for she wanted to save her family from destruction. She understood the power dynamics in the society as she was abandoned by her father King Uparichar Vasu on the pretext of her being a girl as he kept her brother with him. Due to her humble upbringing, she was abhorred by everyone in the kingdom, was labelled an opportunist and had to prove her worth. Allan G. Johnson, an American writer, in his book

The Gender Knot writes, “If you want a story about heroism, moral courage, spiritual transformation, endurance, or any of the struggles that give human life its deepest meaning, men and masculinity are usually the terms in which you must see it. Men’s experience is what patriarchal culture uses to represent human experience, even when it is women who most often live it” (10).

Kane’s *Sita’s Sister* traces the life of Urmila, the wife of Lakshman. In the epic the *Ramayana* several women characters can be seen who have played their role as *pativrata* wives, but the concept of *pativrata* can also be seen from a female perspective as the novel explores the psychological and physical journey of Urmila who is not just Sita’s sister or Lakshman’s wife but an erudite academic, a woman of immense courage who managed the kingdom of Ayodhya when she was left alone in the palace by her husband and her sister to look after the family. Dr Rashmi Vajpayee in her blog “Urmila: The Forgotten Heroine of Ramayana” writes that according to the *Ramayana*, Urmila slept for fourteen years on the behalf of Lakshman as he remained awake for fourteen years to look out for his brother Ram. However, in the novel, Kane undertakes to rewrite the narrative of Urmila and with it she articulates the most inconsequential characters like Kaushalya and Mandavi. The novel along with focusing on the role of Urmila as an ideal sister, wife and daughter-in-law highlights the male conspiracy to label the women as inferior. Kaikeyi, the wicked woman of the epic, also finds mention and reason for her actions. According to the novel it was necessary to send Ram into exile and Kaikeyi had to act as a catalyst to make that happen and her actions ultimately brought glory to Ram, still as a character she is often criticised. Marriage, separation, women’s relationships and family dynamics are the central theme of the novel. The focal point of the novel is not the war fought on the battlefield but the one within the family, one within oneself. When Urmila heard about the abduction of Sita and learns about the negligence of Lakshman, she questioned her mother-in-law why she had not stopped Sita from going into the forest with Ram as they had persuaded Ram but never tried to stop Sita, “The fact that Sita was with him, made you feel better that there was someone to look after him. She was the ideal, doting wife who was practising her dharma of following her husband, never mind the danger she would be vulnerable to. But, Mother, it was she who needed to be looked after—not Ram or Lakshman. They are warriors, not Sita!” (Kane 221).

Kavita Kane’s *Ahalya’s Awakening* follows the tragic journey of Ahalya the wife of Rishi Gautam who is one of the minor characters from the epic the *Ramayana*. Traditionally, she is known as a beautiful woman created by Brahma and married to Rishi Gautam. Indra seduced her, her husband cursed her for fornication by turning her to stone and Ram extricated her from it. According to the epic, Rishi Vishwamitra narrated the story of Ahalya to Ram to lecture him on the threatening nature of women. Mandakranta Bose in his book *The Ramayana Revisited* states that Ahalya’s episode in the epic reinforces “the dangerous and threatening nature of women... The message is clear: sexuality is pervasive in the adult world., in the control of women, and a threat to the male. Marriage is the culturally normative way to control women, but even within it women pose danger to the male, especially when pregnant or adulterous” (71). The novel provides a fresh interpretation of Ahalya’s story by narrating it from her perspective which carefully highlights her actual character and the responsible situations that led to her adultery. The narrative retraces her life by portraying her childhood, displaying hunger for knowledge, her ambitious qualities, her simplicity, her love for Gautam and marriage. Her existence in the epic purely highlights the ability of men—the ascetic power of her husband and the Ram’s divine nature. Her story served as a warning

for women to be aware of the consequences of adultery and infidelity. Kane's Ahalya is stubborn, possesses a probing mind and acknowledges her mistakes. She prefers intellect over physical beauty, she refutes Indra when he calls her the most beautiful woman and says, "Besides beauty of the body, there is in women beauty of the heart and beauty of the brain, too... But how many see that? Most would not recognise or acknowledge the wisdom behind loveliness, the wit behind the appealing beauty of a woman" (Kane 40). Although Ahalya was guilty of being sexually involved with Indra but the circumstances that led to her crime can't be neglected. Also, Indra was more responsible, yet he received lesser punishment, she on the other hand was cursed by one man and waited thousands of years for redemption from another. Indra's curse turned into a boon when the hundred vulvas were replaced by hundred eyes, he still remained a God. The humanistic portrayal of Ahalya by Kane judiciously describes her sentiments, yearnings and impulses. Despite of her intelligence, beauty, and wit, she has her own flaws and makes errors. Although, she accepts her crime and its repercussions, but she also calls attention to her husband's fault and questions him, "...have you ever heard me? Then you have no right to punish me! And punish me for what? That I felt desire—a desire you, as my husband, could not perceive or satiate?" (Kane 323)

Conclusion

The gynocentric study of feminist revisionist mythology is vital for understanding the role of women in cultural narratives. By focusing on women's experiences and agency, this approach contributes significantly to feminist discourse and empowers future generations to challenge and reinterpret traditional narratives. These novels indicate a shift in feminist ideology from collective women's experience to understanding the experience of an individual woman from their point of view. It becomes necessary to re-read women characters from a woman's point of view because these epics are considered sacred and are used to analyse human behaviour. Women are mostly silenced in general, even the most gifted and extraordinary aren't allowed to put forward their choices and opinions. There is a need to examine these female characters from a feminist point of view, as female characters in the epic are the ones who are held accountable for the subsequent calamities. Women in the epics are used as tools to catalyze the events to fit into the male narrative. Besides being catalysts, they also represent the man-made customs that tend to justify the different practices used to oppress women. As Judith Butler says in her book *Gender Trouble*, "On the one hand, representation serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women" (4). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kane through their revisionist mythological novels have endeavoured to create a voice for female characters who were silent sufferers. Their novels help readers in exploring the representation of women as they recuperate their position. It can be said that "... these authors managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards" (52) as Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar said in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

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