



Rereading the Mahabharata through Feminist Revisionist Lens

Pratibha Rathore¹, Dr. Naresh Kumar Aggrawal²

¹Research Scholar, Tanta University, Sri Ganganagar, Rajasthan, India

²Associate Professor, Department of English, Tanta University, Sri Ganganagar, Rajasthan,
India

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Pratibha Rathore

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Abstract

This article undertakes a feminist revisionist reading of the Mahabharata, one of India's most revered epics, to interrogate its gendered narratives and reimagine its female characters beyond their traditionally prescribed roles. Drawing upon the works of feminist mythmakers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Mahasweta Devi, and Samhita Arni, the article explores how these authors reframe the epic's silenced or marginalized women—Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and others—as agents of resistance, autonomy, and voice. By juxtaposing canonical versions of the Mahabharata with these feminist retellings, the analysis highlights how revisionist storytelling destabilizes patriarchal interpretations and reclaims space for female subjectivity. The article argues that such reinterpretations not only challenge androcentric historiography but also offer a dynamic re-engagement with myth as a living, evolving form of cultural expression. In doing so, it affirms the importance of feminist mythmaking in reshaping collective memory and asserting alternative truths embedded within ancient texts. Through literary analysis, feminist theory, and imaginative myth-making, this article explores how reading the *Mahābhārata* through a feminist revisionist lens reveals new meanings and inspires creative reinterpretations. It highlights how Draupadī, Kuntī, Gandhārī, Uttamā, and other women—often in positions of marginal sovereignty or spiritual command—navigate patriarchy, exert quiet influence, and shape the epic's moral architecture. It also considers how feminist mythmakers might re-imagine these characters, extend or alter scenes, offer polyvocality, or envision alternative futures and moral emphases.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Feminist Revisionism, Mythmaking, Rereading, Marginalized Characters

Feminist revisionism is a critical and transformative approach within feminist theory

that seeks to reinterpret, revise, and often rewrite historical narratives, literary texts, and

cultural norms that have traditionally marginalized or excluded women's voices and experiences. Rooted in the broader feminist movement, revisionist efforts challenge the patriarchal structures embedded in history, literature, religion, and societal ideologies. The aim is not merely to insert women into existing frameworks but to fundamentally question and reshape those frameworks to reflect a more inclusive and equitable understanding of human experience.

Feminist revisionism gained prominence during the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, a period marked by a surge in academic interest in women's studies, gender theory, and social justice. Scholars such as Gerda Lerner, Adrienne Rich, and Kate Millett emphasized the importance of "re-vision" – the act of seeing with fresh eyes, particularly through the lens of women's lived realities. **Adrienne Rich's "Re-Vision" (1972)** defines feminist rewriting as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes" and is foundational to feminist myth revisionism. This re-vision was driven by recognition that historical and literary canons were overwhelmingly male-dominated. Women's contributions were either ignored or undervalued, or misrepresented. Feminist revisionism thus arose as a method to critique and reconstruct these narratives from a feminist perspective, often by uncovering suppressed stories, reinterpreting canonical texts, and exposing the gender biases embedded in language and representation.

Literature has been a particularly fertile ground for feminist revisionism. Writers and scholars interrogate the male-centered literary canon and reinterpret texts through a feminist lens. A key method is the rewriting or reimagining of classical myths, religious stories, and canonical works to highlight female agency or critique patriarchal norms. Examples abound: Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* retells Homer's *Odyssey* from the perspective of Penelope, challenging the glorification of Odysseus and giving voice to the silenced

women in the story. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* revises Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, presenting Bertha Mason not as a madwoman in the attic, but as a colonial victim with her own tragic back-story. These revisions are not merely literary exercises but acts of resistance—efforts to reclaim cultural narratives that have long defined women through the eyes of men.

Feminist revisionism is a vital and dynamic force in the ongoing struggle for gender justice. By challenging dominant narratives, recovering silenced voices, and reimagining cultural touchstones, it not only enriches our understanding of the past but also reshapes the possibilities for the future. Whether through academic critique, literary innovation, or cultural activism, feminist revisionism continues to invite us to see the world differently—and, in doing so, to change it.

Feminist mythmakers frequently give voice to silenced or demonized female characters—Eurydice, Medusa, Helen, or Lilith—showing them not as passive objects but as narrators and agents of their own stories. Traditional myths often moralize female sexuality and obedience. Feminist revisions question these binaries, challenging the portrayal of women as either saints or sinners, virgins or whores. Male heroes in classical myths often achieve glory through violence, conquest, or betrayal. Feminist retellings expose the human cost of such heroism, especially on women, and propose alternate forms of courage—resilience, empathy, and resistance. Many feminist mythmakers blend myth with autobiography or contemporary themes—exploring motherhood, abuse, love, identity, and trauma. The myth becomes a mirror for the modern world, allowing ancient stories to resonate with current feminist struggles.

Feminist revisionist mythmaking is more than a literary technique—it is an act of ideological resistance. By rewriting foundational stories, feminist writers challenge the cultural authority of myths that have

perpetuated inequality. They use the same narrative tools that once marginalized women to now empower them. This act of rewriting also reaffirms that myths are not sacred or unchangeable. They belong to everyone, and through feminist engagement, they become dynamic spaces for dialogue, reimagining, and healing. Feminist revisionist mythmakers play a crucial role in reshaping cultural consciousness. By challenging inherited myths and offering counter-narratives, they not only critique historical injustice but also imagine new possibilities for identity, power, and gender. In doing so, they remind us that the stories we tell about the past shape the futures we are able to envision—and that reclaiming the narrative is itself a revolutionary act.

Myths have long shaped the foundations of culture, identity, and belief. Rooted in ancient traditions, they often encode societal values, gender roles, and collective memory. Yet, for centuries, the mythological canon has largely reflected patriarchal ideologies, casting women as temptresses, victims, or secondary characters in male-centered narratives. In response, feminist revisionist mythmakers emerged to challenge these inherited stories. Through literature, poetry, and critical theory, they reimagine traditional myths from a feminist perspective—centering women's voices, questioning gender roles, and reclaiming the power of storytelling as a form of resistance and transformation. Classical myths from traditions such as Greek, Roman, Hindu, Norse, and Abrahamic narratives often reflect patriarchal values. Female figures like Pandora, Eve, or Medusa have historically been depicted in roles that reinforce female guilt, passivity, or danger. These myths have served to justify gender hierarchies and the subordination of women. Myths, however, are not fixed—they are fluid, open to reinterpretation. Feminist revisionist mythmakers use this malleability to question dominant narratives and to foreground alternative truths that better reflect the complexities of women's experiences.

The *Mahābhārata*, one of the longest and most complex epics in the world, offers a richly interwoven saga of familial conflict, dharmic duty, power struggles, and cosmic consequences. Traditionally, readings of the *Mahābhārata* have focused on its patriarchal narratives—the valor of the Pandavas, the strategy of Krishna, the ambitions of Duryodhana, and the tragic moral dilemmas of Bhīṣma, Draupadī, and Karna. However, a **feminist revisionist** approach invites us to re-examine this epic through the agency, voices, and marginality of its female characters. This lens challenges conventional readings, foregrounding women's perspectives, re-centering their values, and envisioning alternative mythic responses and narrative possibilities.

Feminist revisionist mythmaking involves the creative re-vision of canonical myths to recover or re-center women's voices, highlight female agency, challenge patriarchal assumptions, and propose counter-narratives. Mahasweta Devi's feminist re-imaginings "[confront] the violence of both patriarchy and caste hierarchy" (Devi 29). Many female characters in patriarchal texts are underdefined, silent, or narrated through male lens. Feminist rereading aims to amplify their interiority, decision-making, and emotional reality. Women like Draupadī or Kuntī wield power not through overt martial arts, but through cunning speech, moral framing, spiritual resource, or maternal influence. Feminist mythmaking deciphers and highlights these subtler dynamics.

Re-visioning often means retelling key scenes from women's perspectives—e.g., Draupadī's *vastra-haran*, Gandhārī's blindness, Uttarā's grief—thus shifting narrative emphasis and ethical interpretation. Feminist mything doesn't just recover; it extends. It imagines what would happen had women taken different paths, or if their moral perceptions shaped events more centrally.

Draupadi, often viewed as a catalyst for the war, is more than the Lañghaniya (to be violated): she is a fiercely articulated moral and existential presence. *The Palace of Illusions* portrays her autonomy in the following words: "Draupadi is no longer a passive victim of fate but a narrator of her own destiny: "I was never the obedient daughter or the demure wife"" (Divakaruni 12). The episode of her disrobing in the Kuru court reveals layers: her invocation of Krishna for salvation, her refusal to submit silently, and her later insistence that vows and dharmic order cannot be desecrated. A feminist rereading sees her as a moral resistor—her rage is a defense of communal ethics and autonomy. A feminist mythmaker might expand her voice immediately after the vastra-haran, giving her internal monologue on shame, rage, and justice; or imagine a private dialogue between her and Kuntī, complicating her alliances and grief. Instead of focusing exclusively on Yudhishtira's gambling, recast the scene through Draupadi's perspective—her dread, her sense of betrayal, her strategic thinking ("What weapon does she have in that moment?"), her attempt to reason or disrupt.

Kuntī's life is marked by abandonment, political vulnerability, and maternal loyalty. Despite her secondary position, she issues curse, counsel, and maternal command. Her invocation of Karṇa as her "first-born" reconfigures filial identity and moral claims. A feminist rereading foregrounds her grief in agreeing to Draupadi's marriage to five husbands, her loneliness in exile, and her ambivalent complicity in Kaurava ascendancy. Talking about Kuntī's silencing in the epic and her reclamation Arni's work emphasizes "the spaces in between the words—the things the epic doesn't say" (Arni 45). A creative myth could explore her interior world—her doubt when she blesses and releases her "illicit" child, her guilt in favoring Karṇa internally even as she raises the Pandavas. Imagine Kuntī overhearing or sensing the outcome of gambling—her mental turmoil between silence

and intervention; what if she called out? Even a fleeting inner voice changes the texture. What if Kuntī herself had attempted to mediate peace more directly? One might imagine an alternative scene where she confronts Shakuni or Duryodhana, pleading for reconciliation, highlighting her maternal diplomacy.

The tragic figure of Gandhārī, who blindfolds herself to share Dhṛtarāṣṭra's darkness, becomes in feminist mythic reinterpretation a symbolic choice. She voluntarily renounces sight to deepen empathy for her husband's constant vision—this can be read as a radical act of solidarity. After she withdraws to the forest, her wailing curse of destruction against the Pandavas becomes the ultimate maternal fury—neither powerless nor silent. A feminist retelling could frame her not as resigned but as calculating, using her curse intentionally to reclaim moral agency in face of familial collapse. Her blindness becomes a metaphor for self-imposed moral clarity—choosing ignorance to pierce illusion. A poem-narrative could place her in the forest, conversing with the dead, mediating grief, and bearing witness to the consequences of war.

Other women—Subhadrā (often in secondary narrative level), Hidimbā, Ulūpyā, and the queens of the Pandavas—inhabit shaded spaces. **Subhadrā** as the mother of Abhimanyu, albeit briefly featured, deserves attention. A feminist rereading might imagine her grief when her son dies in the Chakravyuha, not only as a mother, but as a woman who lives the war's residual aftermath. What if she held a clandestine rite, or wrote a lament that became oral memory? Imagining her songs, her communities, her mourning, embeds women into post-war reconstruction.

Beyond individuals, a feminist mythmaking approach can create a chorus of women—wives, mothers, sisters—who negotiate loss, uphold memory, and maintain moral continuity. For example, weaving a narrative of queen-widows gathering in

Draupadī's courtyard, recounting stories of their husbands, sons, or husbands' brothers before turning to envision peace and healing. This chorus becomes counter-mythic infrastructure: they are the invisible moral sustenance of the epic.

Present the epic in intertwined first-person voices: Draupadī, Gandhārī, Kuntī, **Subhadra**, Uttarā each take turns narrating fragments, offering contrasting emotional logic—mourning, resistance, counsel, survival. This polyphony challenges hierarchical narrative. What happens if Draupadī refused to accept exile? What if Gandhārī's curse took a different form—an invocation of restoration instead of destruction? What if women prescribed dharmic reconciliation rituals post-war? Reimagining the narrative's final portion from women's care perspective—ritual healing, memorial building, ethical futures—opens new mythic horizons. That Draupadī asks for Krishna's intervention can be reframed as spiritual mastery rather than passive recourse—an assertion of divine solidarity. A feminist retelling might expand this: Draupadī consciously channels divine ethos, and the divine presence is her inner voice. Similarly, Gandhārī's blindfold becomes a symbol of pregnant moral knowing—not ignorance, but an elective sacrifice to better perceive injustice.

Feminist revisions of the *Mahābhārata* challenge monologic tradition and restore women as moral and spiritual authorities. This reclamation matters culturally: it re-balances epic memory, affirms the emotional and ethical complexity of female characters, and enriches popular and scholarly receptions of Indian myth. Modern storytellers, theater-makers, graphic-novelists, filmmakers can integrate these feminist reframings—reshaping the epic for new audiences, re-touching its moral core. Feminist revisionist mythmaking "functions not only as reinterpretation but as resistance" (Punekar 102).

In teaching the *Mahābhārata*, including feminist rewritings encourages students to see the epic not as fixed but as dynamic—multiple interpretations, voices, and moralities. Comparative study—classical text alongside a feminist retelling—develops critical thinking, textual empathy, and creative possibility.

A further step would be merging feminist and intersectional reinterpretation: considering caste, class, indigeneity, and disability. For instance, Draupadī's Panchāla heritage, Gandhārī's royal yet foreign status, Kuntī's childlessness and abandonment—all intersect gender with other axes. A feminist mythmaker could explore these layers—how Draupadī's caste affects her standing, how **Subhadra's** informal status shapes her grief, how Gandhārī's foreignness compounds her othering.

One of the most powerful implications is therapeutic: giving voice to silenced suffering, transforming trauma into narrative healing. A feminist revision can create mythic rituals of mourning, rebuild aunt-mother solidarity, or compose songs for unnamed daughters of war. Such mythmaking aligns with feminist literary therapy—using story to process collective trauma.

Finally, feminist revisionist mythmaking is proactive, not only reactive. Building feminist epics—new stories that draw on the *Mahābhārata* but center women's creative sovereignty—could become an ongoing movement. Writers might draft new Book of Kuntī, Draupadī's counsel-book, or create mythic-fantasy reconstructions where women shape dharma in public council. Re-reading the *Mahābhārata* through a feminist revisionist mythmakers' lens does more than recover women's voices—it re-imagines the epic's ethical, narrative, and mythic architecture. It restores Draupadī's moral fire, Kuntī's silent strength, Gandhārī's cursed justice, Uttarā's grief-work, and the collective chorus of women who survive war's aftermath. It invites creative rewriting—

polyvocal narratives, alternative scenes, symbolic amplification, and future-facing mythic extensions. The result is a rebalanced epic, one that elevates female interiority, agency, and moral authority, and proposes a new mythic grammar for post-patriarchal imagination. Thus, feminist re-visioning also ripples into cultural practice: from education to literature, from theater to healing narrative, it shapes how the *Mahābhārata* is read, taught, and lived. In this reframing, women are not footnotes to kings and heroes—they are myth-makers, moral engines, and carriers of ethical possibility.

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