



Subversion in mythology and the reinscription of gendered erasures

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Abstract

The paper engages with the sites of subversion through the newly popular genre of mythological fiction, where gender roles in canonical texts are challenged, reversed, or rewritten. Mythological subversion exposes, resists, or recomposes the gendered erasures of patriarchal narratives. Mythology has historically functioned as a tool of gendered erasure, where female, queer, or non-binary identities are oppressed, silenced, or transformed into symbols rather than agents. By encoding canonical hierarchies and silencing female and queer subjectivities, the very fluidity of mythic form enables acts of subversion. Through reinterpretation and retelling, myths become spaces where erased identities are rewritten and reclaimed, transforming structures of oppression into narratives of resistance. The paper proves that the myths not only erase but also subvert gendered power structures.

Key words: Erasures, mythology, feminist, gender, patriarchy, subversion.

Introduction

According to Carl Jung, a famous psychiatrist, Myth is a necessary aspect of the human psyche which needs to find meaning and order in the world. The word 'Myth' is derived from a Greek word, Mythos, which means story. Myths are interwoven into the fabric of every society for their relevance and intrinsic values. They pave the way for analysis across continents in terms of cultures, literature, and political thought. Subversion overturns and challenges traditional and dominant narratives to question established hierarchies. Mythological characters, episodes and stories are retold and

reinterpreted to highlight generally neglected corners to rebuild faith, attract readers and for lucrative purposes. Shah (2021) finds that, "In the domain of Indian writing in English, there are countless examples of Indian writers, both writing in India or elsewhere, who make use of mythology to serve their targets as fiction writers" (134). Such reinterpretations also empower the so-called mythically and historically "deprived" characters and groups. Rose, Cynthia (2025) argues that, "By presenting alternative perspectives and marginalised voices, recreation encourages interpretative plurality" (74). Every culture has a rich

mythology of divine figures, which were either historically marginalized or muted by the mainstream versions of myth. For example, the character of Ahalya in Gautam Ghosh's short movie Ahalya is in contrast to the original version, where she is pious and unblemished. Ghosh's Ahalya seduces visitors and is outright a cheat. The same is the case with Mahasveta Devi's rebellious Dopdi juxtaposed against Draupadi of the epic *Mahabharata*. The waves of feminism have inspired such representations and reinterpretations. Ojha and Gorasya (2019) address,

"Feminism as a theory in the evaluation of literature that was well underway by the late sixties. It is an attempt to describe women's experiences as depicted in various kinds of literature. It questions the subjugation, domination, patriarchal attitudes, and male interpretations in literature. In addition, it challenges traditional and stereotypical male ideas about women and their role in society. Feminism has travelled a long distance" (151).

The positive changes brought by subversion have empowered women generally relegated in the mainstream mythology. *Legends of Khasak* by O P Vijayan's Dalit reinterpretation of Ravana challenges Brahmanical discourse by making him a hero. In Greek mythology, Medusa, once villainized, is now presented as a victim of patriarchal violence and a symbol of survival and female power. Women in Hindu Mythology have been portrayed as obedient daughters, virtuous wives, and affectionate mothers. Even the seductress Menaka (the apsara or celestial maiden) was forced to leave her daughter according to patriarchal dictates. The documented details of such women were draped in the guise of womanhood, righteousness and duty. Their voices and concerns are represented in the genre of mythological fiction, which gives them well-deserved space. Some silent and demonized characters in traditional myths are also

entertained in a positive light. Finally, as protagonists, other aspects of their personalities and their struggle to prove themselves have come to light. This paper attempts to highlight the muffled voices through the Subaltern theory that brings respect and authority to those who were otherwise suppressed by the severe hegemonic practices. Ghosh (2020) comments on the genre of mythological fiction:

Amish Tripathi, a Mumbai based finance sector professional, who would force other English publishers to reconsider mythological genre fiction as profitable commercial fiction investment in the Indian book market, setting off a bigger second wave of mythological genre fiction in Indian English readers or audience have been so deeply fascinated by these fictions that this genre has become a bestseller now (Ghosh, 116).

The trend of subversion to empower deprived characters can be considered as cultural rebellion for recontextualizing their stories from a new angle. The reversal of power brings freedom and makes them agents of change.

Literature Review

The indelible impact of mythology on our lives can be seen in the political ideologies, traditions and general psyche of people. Myths are not static; they are living texts open to reinterpretation. New myths are created, and old myths are revised and revitalized for the newer situations and directions. Mythological fiction has famous legends, ancient stories with mythological themes that are often recast from symbols of sin, chaos or temptation, as symbols of power, agency and desire. For example, Eve's act of eating the forbidden fruit, according to feminist theologians, was not disobedience but a quest for knowledge. As a feminist icon, Lilith is resurrected as a symbol of sexual autonomy and resistance. In Hindu mythology, male protagonists are glorified for their leadership, gallantry and divinity, but now females are also

being focused on and portrayed in retellings/mythological fiction. Abhinaya and Rajlaxmi (2023) state that, "In ancient Indian literature, women have always been represented as weak, docile beings who had to follow the patriarchal laws. These regulations progressively became the mental and physical chains that robbed them of their dignity, respect, and human standing" (02). But the new stories are different "These retellings highlight the harsh reality that women's voices are rarely heard in the annals of history, and they help these women recognise the hidden oppression that is entangling them psychologically" (03). Similarly, Rose, Cynthia (2025) explains the nature of retellings, "The re-telling or the re-versions of the same narrative thus presents the story in a format that suits the present audience. It is the author's attempt at creating an existing story in a new form which suits contemporary readers' expectations. Moreover, recreation expands the lifespan of ancient texts to survive after years and generations" (74). Regarding feminist retellings, she states that, "Modern retellings of Indian mythological narratives often take a feminist lens—not to denigrate tradition but to amplify the muted voices of women who have long lingered in the margins" (77).

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, mythology, as an allegorical narrative, is a body of myths, such as myths dealing with the gods, demigods, and legendary heroes of a particular people. It is a branch of knowledge that deals with myth. It is a collection of myths, especially one belonging to a particular religious or cultural tradition. These mythologies are dynamic and flexible, as changes in the conventional texts are made to gain popularity. Retellings are being produced in print and visual media to suit feminist sensibilities. Luthra (2014), in this context, states,

While the appropriation of the epics carries certain risks, such as unintentional complicity with right-wing conservative

projects and the positioning of Indian feminism as exclusive of caste and class concerns, it is contended here that the risk is worth taking because the epics continue to be an important and contested part of the cultural field, and because the feminist appropriations can absorb and respond to the critiques to some degree (135).

Feminism not only supports the principle of equality between men and women; it also demands special privileges for specific reasons. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* women were given supportive roles of passive wives, tolerant mothers, obedient daughters, affectionate sisters, etc. Kulkarni, Sanika (2020) observes that "The *Ramayana* is an over-interpreted epic where Sita is usually a stereotype of a perfect Indian wife. Everyone who has positioned her character in that manner is a feminist observation many scholars hold. Sita in the Valmiki version of *Ramayana* has been represented as a passive, submissive, docile, and self-sacrificing woman who is very much devoted to her husband in exile, and remains devoted to him despite the hardships she has to endure. Due to these qualities, which aided patriarchy in creating their own definition of the morality of women, Sita in Valmiki *Ramayana* was often glorified and idealized as a role model worthy of respect" (716). Gayatri Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" is answered by the feminist mythological rewritings and through the reclamation of survival.

Gendered Erasures in Mythological Fiction

This spate of myth-based fiction is filtered through a feminist lens, giving voice to the mute women characters of the epics. Therefore, subversion is an essential tool for taking liberties with the story to make it more relevant to contemporary readers. For example, feminist theology represents Eve, Mary Magdalene, and Lilith as symbols of resistance and independence, unlike conventional mythology, where they stand for disobedience, sin or shame.

Writers of mythological fiction are competing to prove their point in the best possible ways. In this regard, Pandey and Jodha (2023) state that, "They all have attempted to re-tell Hindu mythology with a novel perspective" (163). The lives of Sita, Ahalya, Mandodari, Urmila, Draupadi, and others, such as Yashodhara, Savitri, Surpanakha, Sarma, and Rukmini, have been explored by many authors. The patriarchy-based discrimination against women has found voice in these subversions. Feminism and post-feminism have entered the narrative to create empowered women characters who can serve as role models for young girls. First among these mythological characters is Sita of the *Ramayana*, whose divinity and docility are juxtaposed against the masculinity of Sita presented by Amish Tripathi in *The Warrior of Mithila*. She is a devoted consort and a brave fighter who balances her roles at the battlefield and personal space. There are numerous retellings on Sita, such as Ashok Banker's *The Siege of Mithila*, Sita: *An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* by Devdutt Pattanaik, Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*, *In Search of Sita*, an audiobook by Namita Gokhale and Arni Samhita's *Sita's Ramayana*, etc. Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* delineates Sita's journey self-realization. and her when she is exiled to the forest. Janaky Sharma's *Sita: The Furrow Princess* focuses on her spotless divine character. Another book by Heidi Rika Pauwel, *The Goddess as Role Model: Sita and Radha in Scripture and on Screen*, narrates an unconventional narrative. When Volga's Sita questions her predicament, Ahalya replies: "Aren't many women in this world wrongly accused, Sita?" (Volga 25).

Draupadi is also one of the most loved female characters, having retellings in various languages. Written in Oriya, *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* by Pratibha Ray is very popular among critics. Originally written in Bengali, Mahasweta Devi's story 'Draupadi' has been adapted for the screen and translated into various languages. Devi's *Dopdi* is a strong

woman who, despite her marginalised status and exploitation, remains strong. There are popular books like *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Draupadi-India's First Daughter* by Vamshi Krishna, Saiswaroop Iyer's *Draupadi: The Tale of an Empress*, *Draupadi: The Sati Series III* by Koral Dasgupta, and the list goes on. In *The Palace of Illusions*, she interrupts the tutor when he says, "Women are the path to ruin" She retaliates, "I resented the tutor's declaration that women were the root of all the world's trouble" (24). Luthra (2014) finds that "Draupadi is conscious that has been placed in the predicament of sharing five husbands through no fault of her own; yet, her reputation has become vulnerable as a result—not only within the epic itself but for posterity" (149).

The most neglected woman in the *Ramayana* is Urmila, as narrated by Hindi author Maithili Sharan Gupt in his well-known book *Saket*. The wife of Lakshman remains in the palace while Ram, Sita, and Lakshman go into exile for fourteen long years. Her plight has been imagined and retold by many writers in Hindi, English and other regional languages. Among these books, the most recent one is *Sita's Sister* by Kavita Kane. *Sita: The Warrior of Mithila* by Amish Tripathi shows the two princesses of Mithila as fearless, strong-headed and resilient. *Urmila* by Pervin Saket has a mythical touch to the story of Urmila Karmarkar, married into a wealthy, politically connected family in suburban Mumbai, who traces a tale of rejection. Her loneliness leads her to find solace in her hobbies as she fights to keep her dreams alive, waiting for her husband to return. Smriti Dewan's. *Urmila: The Forgotten Princess* is an alternative retelling from the perspective of Urmila, the Mithila heir. She is the owner of the sacred bow Pinaka, who is asked to oversee and protect Ayodhya in the absence of Ram, Sita and Lakshman. Writers who have given Surpanakha the lead role have justified her stand in life like

Lanka's Princess by Kavita Kane shares the negativity in Surpanakha's life, as her role in the *Ramayana* is much neglected, despite its

relevance to the story. However, Kane has humanized her and made her look real to readers. *An Infatuation* by Amit Chaudhury reinterprets Surpankha's character when, after six days of watching Lord Ram from behind a bush, she falls in love with him. Ram and his younger brother Lakshman humiliate her for her advances. *Ravana's Sister (Meenakshi)* by Anand Neelakantan takes Soorpankha from the periphery to another level. Her trauma of rejection makes her vengeful. Although she was called Meenakshi, the girl with beautiful eyes, her ears, nose, and breasts were chopped off as punishment for seeking love from Ram and Laxman. The book *Surpankha*, written by Hariharan Iyer, is inspired by this mythical character, but the story is subverted. *Thaikulam*, a book on Suparnkha written in Malayalam by Sara Joseph, has many important characters of the *Ramayana* who set the events of the epic in motion. Lakshmi (2018) comments, "Thaikulam attempts to question the age-old glorification of Rama and Lakshmana. The author brings Rama out of his Purushottam image to one of a patriarch. Sara Joseph, in her story, through certain monologues and conversations, paints Shurpankha in new colors" (94).

Mandodari's story in Koral Dasgupta's book shows how women are often silenced under a patriarchal setup. She emerges as a sensible woman of intelligence, resilience and endurance. Ravan recognizes her talent as an architect under her father, Mayasur's guidance: "Your father denied you the credit, though he readily adopted your suggestions. Fathers are kind, artists are competitive." (Dasgupta 51). Manini J. Anandani's first book, *Mandodari: Queen of Lanka* (2018), is based on the pious wife of Ravana, Dhyanmalini (Mandodari), who loved Ravana and, despite his faults, continually advised him to follow the right path. The story is influenced by Sanghadasa's Jaina version of the *Ramayana*. Ravana's defeat in a thirteen-day war raised questions like what if he were the real hero, and his downfall resulted from the scheming of rivals. *Mandodari's Ravanayana* by

Sundari Haran is a challenging narrative that poses numerous questions regarding right and wrong, loss and gain, his demonhood and more. It is Ravanayan, as it is the story of Ravana and not Rama, in which Mandodari is the sufferer.

Although many writers have written stories of Yashodhara in various languages and genres, Maithili Sharan Gupt, Rangeya Raghav, and Angha Joglekar have received applause in the Hindi language. Marathi writer Prakash Kharat's book on Yashodhara describes her pain and struggle after the self-exile of her husband. Vibhavari's Book *Yashodhara* in English is yet another tribute to the great woman. Volga's book was originally written in the Telugu language and has been translated into English. Her story of Yashodhara starts with Siddhartha, the future Gautama Buddha, who leaves for his spiritual journey to enlightenment. This story has been told innumerable times over the centuries, but the book *Yashodhara* questions what she, as a young girl, thought and reacted to when she married Siddhartha at the age of sixteen.

Ahalya's Awakening by Kavita Kane has received critical acclaim from readers. The bestselling author's remarkable retelling gives a voice to a character cursed to turn into a stone without any fault of her own. Created by Brahma, married to sage Gautam and desired by the king of gods, Indra, she was maligned and cursed by her own husband. In Koral Dasgupta's *Ahalya*, the book describes her inner turmoil and exposes the myth that silenced her. Brahma informs Gautam, "Gautam, my most precious creation is now your responsibility" (Dasgupta 34). *Ahalya* is created as an object of possession to serve as a divine companion for male ambition.

In the Sati series, Dasgupta showcases Tara as an intelligent stateswoman whose strategies are to bring peace and order to the kingdom. Her unwavering strength in the time of chaos serves as a testament to her unyielding spirit.

She ascends to the throne after Bali's demise and Sugriv's ascension to the kingdom. In *Tara's Truce* by Kavita Kané, Tara finds herself as a victor's trophy after a battle of egos between the two brothers. Tara compromises to fulfil her duty as a divinely ordained purpose, which also includes marrying her husband's brother.

The collective consciousness of society must assimilate the significant role played by the female counterparts who have faced subjugation for a very long time. In Indian literature, powerful feminine archetypes like Kali and Durga embody destructive and creative power juxtaposed against the submissive femininity. Lord Shiva's Ardhanarishvara form synthesises genders, whereas Kali's violent authority is in contrast with the canonical domestication of feminine divinity. The sentiments and ideologies of feminist reclaiming illuminate and construct their own narratives.

Conclusion

Mythological subversion functions as a counter-discursive strategy through which marginalized voices reinterpret sacred narratives to challenge oppression and reclaim cultural agency. These retellings are a form of resurrection which transforms erasure into expression, silence into story, and subjugation into sovereignty. Feminism and Post feminism influenced writers have changed ancient stories with patriarchal setups into rebellious and assertive narratives. They have reinterpreted and revisited history, legends, and myths in the modern context to find new meanings and solutions to the current problems. Therefore, patriarchal traditions erase and subversive retellings create space by exposing the instability of gender hierarchies and reclaiming erased subjectivities.

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