



RECLAIMING FEMALE VOICES: FEMINIST REINTERPRETATIONS OF MYTHOLOGICAL HEROINES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract

Contemporary Indian English literature has witnessed a remarkable resurgence of mythological retellings that challenge patriarchal narratives and foreground women's experiences. Traditional mythological texts often portray female characters through male-centric perspectives, limiting their agency and voice. However, contemporary women writers have revisited these narratives to reclaim female subjectivity, autonomy, and resistance. This paper examines feminist reinterpretations of mythological heroines in contemporary Indian English literature, focusing on selected works by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, Volga, and other contemporary authors. Through feminist literary criticism, the study explores how these writers reconstruct mythological women such as Draupadi, Sita, Urmila, Ahalya, and Uruvi as autonomous individuals rather than passive figures. The analysis reveals that feminist retellings challenge patriarchal structures, redefine gender identities, and create alternative narratives that resonate with contemporary feminist discourse. The study contributes to the growing scholarship on myth, gender, and literary revisionism in Indian English literature.

Keywords: Feminism, Mythology, Indian English Literature, Gender Studies, Mythological Heroines, Retellings, Feminist Literary Criticism.

1. Introduction

Mythology has long served as a foundational component of Indian cultural consciousness. Epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have shaped social values, gender norms, and moral frameworks for centuries. Traditional interpretations of these texts largely emerged from patriarchal perspectives that privileged male heroes while relegating women to supportive roles.

The emergence of feminist literary criticism in the twentieth century encouraged scholars and writers to revisit canonical narratives and question dominant representations of women. In India, contemporary English-language authors have increasingly turned to mythology as a site of feminist intervention. Rather than accepting inherited portrayals, they reconstruct mythological heroines as active agents capable of questioning authority, resisting oppression, and asserting their identities.

The present study examines the ways contemporary Indian English writers reclaim female voices through feminist reinterpretations of mythological heroines.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine feminist reinterpretations of mythological heroines in contemporary Indian English literature.
2. To analyze the representation of agency and resistance among female mythological characters.
3. To investigate how contemporary authors challenge patriarchal narratives.
4. To evaluate the significance of feminist retellings in contemporary literary discourse.



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5. To explore the relationship between mythology and modern feminist thought.

3. Research Questions

1. How do contemporary Indian English writers reinterpret mythological heroines?
2. In what ways do feminist retellings challenge patriarchal traditions?
3. How is female agency represented in contemporary mythological fiction?
4. What relevance do these reinterpretations have for contemporary feminist discourse?

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical research methodology.

Sources

Primary Texts

- *The Palace of Illusions* (2008)
- *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019)
- *The Liberation of Sita* (Translated into English)
- *Karna's Wife* (2013)
- *Sita's Sister* (2014)
- *Lanka's Princess* (2015)

Secondary Sources

- Books
- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Feminist literary criticism
- Scopus-indexed publications
- Research papers published up to January 2026

Method

- Feminist Literary Analysis
- Textual Analysis
- Comparative Analysis
- Critical Interpretation



5. Theoretical Framework

Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist literary criticism examines the representation of women in literature and critiques patriarchal structures embedded in literary texts.

Elaine Showalter, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have significantly contributed to feminist literary theory.

The central concern is the recovery of women's voices and experiences marginalized within dominant narratives.

Revisionist Mythmaking

Alicia Ostriker introduced the concept of "revisionist mythmaking," referring to the process by which women writers reinterpret traditional myths from feminist perspectives.

Contemporary Indian mythological fiction exemplifies this literary strategy.

Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial feminism critiques both colonial and patriarchal structures.

Indian feminist retellings often combine gender critique with cultural reinterpretation.

6. Mythology and Gender Representation

Indian mythology contains numerous powerful female figures.

Examples include:

- Sita
- Draupadi
- Ahalya
- Kunti
- Gandhari
- Urmila
- Mandodari

Traditional narratives often emphasize:

- Sacrifice
- Obedience
- Chastity
- Devotion

Modern feminist writers challenge these portrayals by highlighting:



- Desire
- Autonomy
- Agency
- Resistance

7. Feminist Reinterpretation as Literary Resistance

Feminist retellings function as acts of literary resistance.

These narratives seek to:

- Recover silenced voices.
- Challenge patriarchal interpretations.
- Humanize mythological women.
- Create alternative perspectives.

Such reinterpretations transform mythological heroines from passive symbols into active subjects.

8. Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* represents one of the most influential feminist retellings of the *Mahabharata*.

The narrative is presented from Draupadi's perspective.

Key themes include:

Female Subjectivity

Draupadi narrates her own story rather than being narrated by others.

Agency

She questions social conventions and political decisions.

Desire

The novel explores her emotional and psychological complexities.

Resistance

Draupadi challenges patriarchal expectations throughout the narrative.

The text transforms Draupadi into an autonomous protagonist.

9. Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments*

Divakaruni's reinterpretation of Sita provides an alternative perspective to the *Ramayana*.

Traditional portrayals depict Sita as the ideal wife.

However, the novel presents:

- Intellectual strength
- Emotional resilience



- Moral autonomy

Sita becomes a narrator of her own experiences rather than a passive recipient of destiny.

10. Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*

Volga's work represents a landmark feminist intervention.

The text reimagines Sita's journey through encounters with:

- Surpanakha
- Renuka
- Ahalya
- Urmila

The narrative emphasizes:

Self-Discovery

Sita develops an independent identity.

Sisterhood

Women support and empower one another.

Liberation

Freedom emerges through self-realization rather than external validation.

11. Uruvi in *Karna's Wife*

Kavita Kane reconstructs Uruvi as a strong and independent woman.

The novel challenges traditional epic narratives by foregrounding a relatively marginalized female character.

Major themes include:

- Choice
- Love
- Political awareness
- Individual freedom

Uruvi actively shapes her own destiny.

12. Urmila in *Sita's Sister*

Traditional versions of the *Ramayana* largely overlook Urmila.

Kavita Kane's novel restores her significance.

The narrative explores:

- Emotional sacrifice
- Psychological endurance



- Personal identity

Urmila emerges as a complex individual rather than a secondary figure.

13. Mandodari and Other Marginalized Women

Contemporary retellings increasingly focus on overlooked female characters.

Examples include:

- Mandodari
- Surpanakha
- Hidimba
- Gandhari
- Ahalya

These characters are reimagined as intelligent, politically aware, and emotionally nuanced individuals.

14. Female Agency in Contemporary Mythological Fiction

Agency refers to an individual's capacity for independent action.

Contemporary retellings demonstrate female agency through:

- Decision-making
- Political participation
- Intellectual independence
- Resistance to patriarchal authority

Female protagonists no longer function merely as symbols of virtue.

15. Patriarchy and Resistance

Patriarchal structures remain central to mythological narratives.

Feminist reinterpretations expose:

- Gender inequality
- Social control
- Female marginalization
- Symbolic violence

Through narrative revision, authors challenge these structures.

16. Identity, Voice, and Subjectivity



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One of the most significant contributions of feminist retellings is the restoration of voice.

Female characters become:

- Narrators
- Thinkers
- Decision-makers
- Agents of change

The shift from object to subject represents a major feminist achievement.

17. Contemporary Relevance

The popularity of mythological retellings reflects contemporary concerns regarding:

- Gender equality
- Women's rights
- Representation
- Identity politics

Readers increasingly seek narratives that question traditional power structures.

18. Comparative Analysis

Traditional Narratives Feminist Retellings

Male-centered perspective Female-centered perspective

Obedience emphasized Agency emphasized

Women as symbols Women as individuals

Silence and sacrifice Voice and resistance

Fixed identities Dynamic identities

The comparison demonstrates the transformative nature of feminist reinterpretation.

19. Major Findings

1. Contemporary Indian English writers reclaim marginalized female voices.
2. Feminist retellings challenge patriarchal interpretations of mythology.
3. Mythological heroines are reconstructed as autonomous individuals.
4. Female agency emerges as a central thematic concern.
5. Alternative narratives provide new understandings of mythological texts.
6. Feminist mythological fiction contributes significantly to gender discourse.



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7. Revisionist mythmaking has become a major literary trend.
8. Contemporary readers increasingly engage with feminist reinterpretations.

20. Conclusion

Contemporary Indian English literature has transformed the representation of mythological women through feminist reinterpretation. Writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, and Volga have challenged traditional patriarchal narratives by restoring agency, voice, and individuality to mythological heroines.

These retellings do not merely revise ancient stories; they engage in a broader cultural and political project of questioning gender hierarchies and reimagining women's identities. By reclaiming female voices, contemporary authors create narratives that resonate with modern feminist concerns while simultaneously enriching literary discourse.

The study concludes that feminist reinterpretations of mythological heroines represent a significant development in Indian English literature, contributing to ongoing conversations about gender, power, identity, and resistance in the twenty-first century.

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