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## Reclaiming Female Identity: Feminist Retellings of the Hindu Epics

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### Abstract:

In contemporary Indian literature, ancient myth, legend and history are revisited, revisioned and recast as an answer to the present theoretical demands for overthrowing the patriarchal absolutism, old tradition, misinterpretation and ideological hegemony. The Indian epics have provided a good number of materials for the modern day writers to interpret and re-create the mythical tales. The web of retellings has made it possible that each creative writer can claim a new version of his own. The Indian epics have been retold by many writers, which include indigenous as well as foreign versions. These retellings were influenced by the predominant social, political and cultural tendencies. They help in surveying the epic from different angles and in reviving the various characters that were thrown to the margins by main stream literature. The present paper looks at feminist retellings of the various tales of *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata*, tracing the scope and importance of retellings, acceptance of feminist retellings along with look at examples from the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakurni, Sara Joseph, Devdutt Pattanaik, Kavita Kane and Mahashweta Devi. The paper brings out the central argument that epics are not fixed texts but they are subjectively interpreted which gives feminists the space to challenge and retell them. Such retelling, when it looks at women's lives- their place in gender relations, their status in family and society and the intersectionality of their marginalities- makes a great contribution to literature and history.

**Keywords:** Retellings, Indian epics, narrative tradition, feminist retellings, reworkings, popular fiction, female, identity, mythology.

Mythology has been very foundation of many cultures and civilizations. *The Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata*, as sagas, mythological texts or religious texts, are two such epics that hold relevance even today with social and religious values still being drawn from them. Values and norms around gender and sexuality are also drawn from them, the characters of Sita and Draupadi or Rama and Arjun evoked as examples even today in conversations on loyalty, bravery and duty:

The ancient epic maintains its status as a culturally foundational text which, apart from philosophical/spiritual values, educational and religious instruction, contains and perpetuates ideas and ideals of ethical obligation (dharma), social norms and gender roles. (Yakkaldevi, 2014)

*The Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata* provide many stories and sub stories which form the richest treasure house of Indian narratology. Apart from providing infinite number of tales, they provide an umbrella concept of fictional resources that appeal to the Indian mind. The Itihasa or Epic narrative has a special importance in Indian narrative tradition in which the human element dominates than any other narrative mode. Human choice has much relevance in these narratives. They cover all areas of human psychology and resolve many intellectual and moral questions. These features of the epics provide profuse scope for retelling. These epics, which originated as oral traditions of stories of kings and kingdoms, have contested and varied authorships and versions across different parts of India and the subcontinent. Arguing that there is no one version of Ramayana but multiple Ramayanas, scholar Ayyappa Paniker rightly states that:

This is why there are Ramayanas and Ramayanas in India, and each one has its own place intact. The omission or addition of a few lines or even the change of the name of a character is no earth shaking matter. In some versions of Ramayana, Sita is the daughter of Ravana; in others Ravana is one of Sita's suitors. This flexibility of narrative details ensures the anonymity of the author. Anyone can produce his own version and fancy his own authorial privilege. (Indian Narratology 14)

Indian literature has produced a lot of re-workings of the epics. The epics are retold according to different cultures, giving new shades, adding new characters and stories and thus altering the overall frame work itself. Romila Thapar has made serious efforts to analyze the various interpretations of the epics especially the Ramayana. In the forward to Paula Richman's *Questioning Ramayana's: A South Asian Tradition*, she says:

... remapping the location of a katha or story of Rama has been a constant feature of Indian civilization... The Valmiki Ramayana should not be necessarily taken as a fixed text... Each variant is better seen in its own specific context before it is juxtaposed with the authoritative versions. (Thapar vii)

This flexibility allows for multiples historical, contemporary and inspired and interpreted versions of the epics; while this paper only examines some selected works, references to the epics and their characters are found in abundance in Indian literature ranging from writings on mythology, literary fiction as well as historical and political fiction and non-fiction. The multiplicity of the epics, however, has not always been accepted, especially by sections who believe in the sanctity of the dominant versions as was the case with A.K. Ramanujan's essay *Three Hundred Ramayanas* which received agitation in 2011. The essay dealt with the diversity of narratives that different versions of the Ramayana have but the right-wing felt that it distorted the "traditions of Hindu culture". (Kesavan, 2011) Attempts to sanitize and standardize the epics and make them central to religion have been made; however, feminist retellings or retellings from a gendered perspective have often escaped this. Part of the reason behind this could be the fact that such works are considered to be works of historical or literary fiction rather than serious subversions of dominant versions of

texts. For example, the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakurni and Devdutt Pattanaik are mostly classified as mythological fiction and fantasy, although Divakurni's book *The Palace of Illusions* did evoke literary and academic interests. Alternative narratives that have feminist perspectives or women's agency in narration or explorations of gender and sexuality have the scope of creating new spaces for hitherto suppressed voices and feminist have used this space by way of various retellings.

Mythology has been only one of the areas of literary work that feminists have sought to challenge by bringing in fresh perspective; history (the feminist counterpart of which is called her story), folklore, fairy tales and children's stories have been some other areas. Popular fiction and science fiction have also seen examples of feminist turns of late. Moreover, feminist works have not only looked at women's perspectives but at gender and sexuality along with other social structures in a more holistic manner. For instance, Uma Chakravarti, in her book *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, has analysed the intersections of gender, caste, religion and the interface with the state.

Indian women for long have been surrounded with the pain and suffering of conventional social order. The image or symbolism of Sita as a devoted wife and Draupadi as a piece of property has remained enduring and it is for feminist retellings to move beyond fixed narratives and imageries. It can be clearly viewed that in *The Ramayana*, for the sake of a husband's suspicion, a woman has to go to exile, bound to give birth and brought up her sons all alone and even after that inspections just to prove her purity she needs another man to defend her. Likewise in the second epic *The Mahabharata*, it is full of the exploitation of women's identity and independence where a woman is forced to be shared by five brothers, being exchanged on the gamble house of the royal court.

The research paper has tried to show how feminist retellings have given a central space to the voices and stories of women from different sections. Chitra Divakurni Banerjee, in her book, *The Palace of Illusions: Panchaali's Mahabharata*, makes Draupadi the narrator of her own story who then also becomes the main actor. This provides sense of identity to Draupadi who begins to question her prescribed place and role in the royal household and in society. She begins by questioning her very name:

Draupadi is seen critically analyzing the names that were given to her brother and to herself. The name Dhristadyumna for her brother meant 'destroyer of enemies' and the name Draupadi for herself merely meant 'daughter of Drupad'. Her brother's name succinctly brings out the mission of his life, which is to kill the incomparable Drona whereas her name, Draupadi, only gave her an identity tied to her father, King Drupad's. (Nair 2011)

Divakurni, who explains that her work sprang from her own observations of how women were always portrayed as peripheral in epics, has been lauded for her work as a feminist one but at the same time, her work has been recognized more as popular fiction than a serious retelling.

The Ramayana preaches that there is no greater gift for a man than his wife. But the phrase gift to a man gives the impression that the wife is merely an object to provide happiness for the man. Draupadi can't diagnose her situation there in the court; her inner voice piercingly asked her about the identity she bears.

I'm a queen. Daughter of king Draupad, Sister of Dhritadyumna, Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins or summoned to court like a dancing girl. (Divakaruni 190)

Here she can feel the alarming voice of Dhairya, a woman who is fully engulfed by the idea of male dominance and women subjugation. Once during her stay in the maternal home she has been taught to be the shadows of her husbands not to stand forward them. Again quoted from the chapter "The wife is the property of the husband, no less than a cow or a slave" (Divakaruni 190). She also raised question on the credibility of the Nyaya Shastra, in the court she was not ashamed to prove her integrity, with a pathetic appeal she asked all the elderly scholar of Hastinapur to turn the pages of Nyaya Shastra where she reminds them:

If perchance a man lost himself, He no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife. (Divakaruni 194)

She derived the underlining meaning in the different dimension that if a man is losing the authority over his wife then from then the lady is an independent individual no one can chase her for their entertainment or benefits.

Sarah Joseph, who has written stories that retell *the Ramayana*, also focuses on stories of women like Sita and Shoorpanakha and stories of the marginalized overall. Joseph primarily challenges the image of Rama as an iconic figure and a do-gooder, she also challenges Valmiki's ideas of 'dharma' and 'adharma' as played out by his characters. Stating at the outset that her stories are feminist critiques of traditional texts, Joseph re-imagines these women and their identities. Reviewing her works, Shilpa Chandran (2014) writes:

In various interpretations of Ramayana, Shoorpanakha's improper lust is ascribed to her female nature whereas Ravana's wrong deeds were never said to spring from his male nature. The author imagined the possibilities of women's liberation through heroines who were confident, powerful, independent, witty and sensitive heroines for whom love and desire were inseparable. (Chandran 42)

In her novel *Oorukaval* translated as *The Vigil*, Rama is portrayed as a man insensitive towards Sita's situation and feelings and only interested in following 'dharma', he is a cruel man whose only purpose is to kill 'demons' and his understanding of demons is often arbitrary:

Rama tells Seetha that Ravana's abduction of her caused bad reputation to his fame as a virtuous person. He was bothered only about him and the Dharma, but not the least about Seetha. Here Seetha herself asks for arranging a funeral pyre for her. The response of Lakshmana and the inhabitants of Lanka shows

Rama's act as a cruel one. They felt that Ravana was more human than Rama.  
(Joseph 72)

Joseph, however, glorifies Sita's act of jumping into the fire which she sees as a brave act on part of the woman who is sick of the world around her.

Another example of the feminist retellings can be seen in the works of Devdutt Pattanaik who in his book titled *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling*, has written the Ramayana from Sita's perspective in order to provide her the much needed voice which she deserved. Pattanaik has delineated each and every aspect of the epic by presenting Sita as a main character. Written with special emphasis on the character of Sita, this work attempts to delve in to what would have been her thoughts, perspectives, and actions as the narrative unfolds in somewhat greater detail than most other versions. Even though the entire epic is told around her abduction and rescue, the novel examines how Sita gets the short end of the stick throughout her life, first exiled by an unfortunate turn of royal family events where she had little control and emphasis, and later cast out by a widely-adored husband, who is perhaps over-sensitive to gossip in his own kingdom.

The tyranny of women in *the Ramayana* is not only restricted to these pictures it is far beyond that, when Lakshmana's wife Urmila has to sacrifice her whole marital life just to support her husband's emotion for a long period of fourteen year, is heart broking . She has nothing to do either with the promises of Dusharatha or with the exile of Ram but she has to stay alone for fourteen years just after her wedding because her husband wants to accompany the elder brother. Kavita Kane in her book entitled *Sita's Sister* has portrayed the life of Urmila, Sita's sister and the neglected wife of Lakshman, and one of the most overlooked characters in *the Ramayana*. Kane has tried to provide a voice to the much neglected character who has her own perspective to tell.

Another kind of feminist retelling is evident in the works of Mahashweta Devi; one of the stories in her book *After Kurukshetra*, titled *Kunti and the Nishadin*, brings in the narratives of women marginalized owing to caste and class locations. The story retells the House of Lac incident in Mahabharata where a conspiracy was hatched to kill Kunti and the five pandavas by inviting them to a house of lac and setting it afire while they would sleep but on getting a whiff of the conspiracy, Kunti invites a servant woman and her five sons to the house, inebriates them and when the house is burnt, the unnamed woman and her sons are killed while the perpetrators believe that it is Kunti and her sons who are dead. In Mahashweta Devi's retelling, Kunti is in the forest when the nishadin or the tribal woman appears and reminds her of the injustice done to her following which Kunti is engulfed by the flames that surround her. In the traditional account, Kunti is unaware of this sin and "unconsciously" wanted to kill the tribal woman and her sons for the "greater good" and Mahashweta Devi, through this and other stories challenges popular notions of greater good and sheds light on the women from marginalized communities. (Devi, 2010) It is evident that woman have come out with retelling that address the gaps and in the traditional versions of the Hindu epics of Ramayana and the Mahabharata; over time, different authors and scholars have picked up different themes and characters and built narratives around them that deal

with their gender, caste, class and sexual identities, and there is much scope for such literature.

The retellings of the epics enrich Indian narratology by its elasticity of structure and by its flexible and fluid nature of narration. Thus it becomes unique in the history of literature where the reader has been granted the freedom to read and retell the text depending on his inclination and discretion. Thus by adding new shades to already told stories, these retellings enrich the Indian narrative tradition. The contemporary writers try to bring out the implicit point of view of different character from the original narrative. Modernizing the Indian myth serves to make the mythology more relatable to the contemporary group of onlookers. In today's identity conscious liberal society, patriarchal tradition, value system and aestheticity have been deliberately subverted or interrogated by the feminist thinkers, theorists and authors through their writings, dialogue and debates. They are challenging to reconstruct a new tradition and society where there will be no issue of gender discrimination and subordination.

A feminist claim to the retelling of the epics is, therefore, extremely significant as they make women, with their gender and other marginalities, central to these stories as narrators or as lead characters. The synthesis of traditional mythology and modernity of the present world here presented through the retellings, which is a conventional message for those who are rooted to the orthodox traditionalism and also for those who are uprooted from the moral ethics of their own culture. These retelling do not revolve around the males of the mythology narrated earlier rather it focuses on the motion of these female characters and their points of view towards their surroundings. Effort has been given to objectify the bringing mythology to the present year and to reshaping and contemporizing the prewritten classic poems. This retelling not only emphasis to asserting the identity of women rather it gives effort to erases the thin line between mythology and past.

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