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## Recreating Draupadi and Sita in Mythological Fiction

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### **Abstract:**

The lure of mythology-related works has always attracted writers and critics to reinterpret and revisit myths. Writers create new, imaginative versions of mythological episodes and characters from our epics in various languages. Feminism-inspired retellings have given voice to neglected female characters of ancient mythological works by authors such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanaik, and Kavita Kane. Their works have done justice to the voiceless characters by placing them as the protagonists. Despite being the heroines of epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the character of Sita and Draupadi never got their due in the original works. Still, new-age authors are subverting and recreating them to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives. The paper aims to explore the myth of Sita and Draupadi in a new avatar in the light of Feminism.

**Keywords:** Mythology, feminism, subversion, retelling, character.

### **Introduction**

Retellings provide an alternative point of view to the existing narratives with many perspectives. The recent mythological fiction challenges patriarchal norms and societal expectations that silenced the female characters of the epics. Women are generally kept silent,

and even if they are given a voice, they are unable to express themselves due to social pressure and gender discrimination. Although nature has empowered her to create and nurture life but recognition of her worth has been scant in life and literature of ancient times. Even women from affluent societies suffered silently and could not voice their concerns and opinions. Sita and Draupadi, as queen and princess, did not have their say, so they were forced to follow the path shown by males in their society. The male chauvinism inspired waves of feminism that paved the way for the emancipation of women. Writers have recreated such characters and given them the lead roles in their works to empower them. Singh (2017) asserts that “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” (385). These books are giving new directions and providing new ethos to contemporary society. The paper analyses how these characters have received different treatment by contemporary writers by subverting the earlier notions of femininity and culture concerning the mythological framework. Devi and Srividhya (2020) argue that “Revisioning myth interprets the myth from a new angle. Revisionist mythmaking attempts to revise, reinterpret, and reconstruct the age-old myth from a feminist perspective” (504).

The new genre of mythological fiction has inspired visual media adaptations, which have a huge demand for such works. Written in simple language with elements of a masala thriller, it has emerged as a relevant cultural phenomenon. This genre has created a culture of buying and reading books, shaping the thought process of critics, readers, academicians, and stakeholders. It decolonizes society from patriarchy and oppression by presenting a feminist interpretation of mythological stories and characters. Taking a step forward, Amish Tripathi has empowered the women characters in his books as role models. His Sita plays the role of a warrior, politician, and devoted wife. His post-feministic take on women's characters has inspired other writers and directors to present women as already empowered and decisive in critical situations. These

retellings are part of popular literature, having women in the lead role, with elements of suspense and thrill added to enhance their readability.

### Literature Review

The interface of myth and literature has given rise to a new genre of mythological fiction within popular literature. This current genre is flourishing with waves of mysticism, thrill, and suspense in the story, attracting the young population of South Asian countries. The influence of Western mythological thrillers like the Percy Jackson series, *Circe*, and *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller is evident in the works of Indian authors in this genre. The genre of mythological fiction gained recognition with an eight-book series on the *Ramayana* by Ashok Banker. In his book on Sita, *Seize of Mithila*, he has given a twist to the story and uses colloquial language used by teenagers of the twenty-first century. So, his Sita is altogether different from the original one in many ways. In her novel *The Vigil* (Oorukaval), Sara Joseph (2014) presents Ram as an insensitive husband who is only interested in following dharma and killing demons. Rama is the husband who is callous toward Sita's feelings and takes interest in the administration of his kingdom only. Luthra (2014) suggests that: "Women's shared sense of suffering with Sita comes through most intensely when they sing of Rama's testing of her through a fire ordeal (the agni pariksha), his banishment of Sita to the forest, his demand that she undergoes a second fire ordeal to prove her chastity, and Sita's final act of asking her mother the earth to take her back" (140). She further argues: "Rejecting the patriarchal norms that insist on control of women's sexuality, she (Sita) categorically refuses to go through the agni pariksha" (143).

Amish Tripathi's *Sita: The Warrior of Mithila* (2017) promotes post-feminist elements where Sita, the bold protagonist, as a warrior, fights battles alongside Ram without wavering from the pedestal of a faithful wife. Thiraviadurai & Shanthi (2021) observe that "She dedicates her life

to benefit humanity in a creative way, with determination and persistence, but never in a way that would harm others. Her political career is certainly a source of hope and inspiration” (30). The retelling of the epic *Ramayana* by Divakaruni in her book *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) gives a discourse on feminism by making it a narrative from Sita’s perspective. Devdutt Pattanaik’s *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* (2013) presents Sita’s character according to the author’s understanding of the epic. Her role as a wife, daughter, and mother in exile makes her a strong person with intelligence. Volga’s (Popuri Lalitha Kumari) rendition of Sita in *The Liberation of Sita* (2018) describes her as a single mother who raises her sons herself in Valmiki’s Ashram. She learns life lessons from other women characters of the *Ramayana*. Surpankha teaches her the value of emotional fulfilment in bringing up her children and discovering her inner self. Renuka shows the way to fidelity, and Ahalya’s life brings a path of self-realisation. A book by Heidi Rika Pauwel, *The Goddess as Role Model: Sita and Radha in Scripture and on Screen* (2008), deals with positive female role models from Indian mythology for women. Janaky Sharma’s *Sita: The Furrow Princess* (2014) is another book on Sita that focuses on her unique persona.

Subramania Bharathi’s poem “Paanchaali Shapatham” (Paanchaali’s Vow) is a symbolic representation of his vision of the catastrophe that will destroy the society that dishonours women. Draupadi is the representative of oppressed women whose lives cannot be compensated with the victory of the Pandavas. Similarly, injustice done to a woman has universal repercussions that will destroy harmony in society. Ira Mukhoty’s book (2021) on Draupadi *Song of Draupadi* retells the story of the Pandava queen from her birth to her marriage to the Pandava brothers. Koral Dasgupta’s *Draupadi* (2022) is the third book in the *Sati series*, which talks about the Pandava queen’s inner life and thoughts. Yet another book on Draupadi by Saiswaroopaa Iyer’s *Draupadi: The Tale of an Empress* (2019), describes many episodes from Draupadi’s life. *Ms. Draupadi Kuru: After the Pandavas* (2016) written by Trisha Das,

takes readers through modern-day Draupadi's life. She goes to New Delhi with her girl squad consisting of Kunti, Amba, and Gandhari to break the monotony of her life in heaven. This is the first part of a two-part series.

This proliferation of myth-related literature has inspired feminists to give voice to the women characters of the epics who were relegated to the margins by sheer neglect. Karthic (2024) emphasises that: "Revisionist mythmaking involves reinterpreting history and mythology. Feminist academists have sought to recontextualise culture and the role of women within it. They endeavor to rewrite and reinterpret from the feminine perspective" (29). Writers have taken the liberty to change the story to make it relevant to contemporary readers. Their flight of imagination has made them identify themselves and their plight with mythical characters; for example, Chandrabati Ramayana in the Bengali language distorts Ram's character because the writer was deserted by her fiancé. Mallika Sengupta (2009) opens her story of *Sitayana* with the scene of the second *agnipariksha*, which is being conducted merely based on suspicion of setting an example for all women.

### **Sita and Draupadi**

The global society of our time needs empowered women of wisdom and compassion who can assert their rights while performing their duties diligently. Keeping this point in view, authors have given newer dimensions to the characters of Sita and Draupadi to express their innermost emotions and tribulations. Sita of Amish in *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (2017) is protective of her younger sister Urmila: "Night is the time for their hunting. There are so many poisonous fruits and trees; we could die just by eating the wrong thing. I'm sure there will be other dangers we are not even aware of... And in the midst of all this, if something were to happen to you, how would I face Maa when I leave this mortal body"? (295). As a brave Kshatriya, she is rather proud of her battle scars, which Amish describes: "She looked like mountain people from the

Himalayas. Not for the first time, she wondered if the Himalayas were her original home. She touched a battle scar on her forearm and winced. Her scars had been a source of pride” (Amish, 211). As the prime minister of Mithila, she works for public welfare and brings many profitable reforms to the subjects. She is practical and morally upright in her actions and decisions, which gives her the confidence to move on. She avoids sycophancy and takes the lead in the battles willingly. The reworking of the epic *Ramayana* by Divakaruni creates a discourse on feminism by making it a story from Sita’s perspective. Valmiki convinces her to write her own story to vent her emotions and anger. The author places Sita at the centre and tells the story of relegated women like Mandodari, Kaikeyi, and Surpankha to make it more relevant to the readers who are sympathetic towards the deprived people. The original story is changed into a critique of fidelity, duty, honour, and betrayal for giving voice to the less important females. Sita questions the boundary line between what is good and acceptable and what is bad and unacceptable in the dominant male society. Divakaruni does not add fictional elements to give it twists and turns, but she provokes the reader to think about the injustices meted out to women characters in the epic. Sita protests in her mind but does not express it strongly. She endures adversities, makes sacrifices, and accepts the mistakes and follies of others, but refuses to go through a second Agnipariksha. Although the book was expected to be a feminist recasting of the epic, it turned out to be a tale of Dharma, Virtue, and Karma. In forgiving Ram for putting her through the ordeal, she accepts oppression in the name of love and loyalty. The reinterpretation and revisiting of the epic have been done many times over by different authors. The narrative gives an insight into the private lives and emotional anxieties of the unsung women characters of the epic, whose sacrifices were never glorified. Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* revives mythology in his manner. Commenting on the Sita of Devdutt Pattanaik, Kulkarni (2020) states that “While we may have seen many different tales and interpretations revolving around the epic *Ramayana*, this particular book of Devdutt Pattanaik

retells the epic, drawing attention to the many oral, visual and written retellings composed in different times, different places, by different poets, each one trying to solve the puzzle in their own unique way” (712).

Draupadi has caught the attention of critics and scholars, so feminist appropriations of her character are numerous, but some are more prominent than others. Chitra Divakaruni’s book *The Palace of Illusions* (2018) is a modern interpretation of the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi’s perspective. The recreation of Draupadi in the first-person narrative has given ample space for other women characters to share their personal experiences. This modern rendering of the *Mahabharata* proves the popular appeal of Draupadi’s character, which changed the course of history centuries ago. Yakkaldevi (2014) argues that “The text highlights a crucial relation established between womanhood and vengeance. Moreover, it displays the struggle for identity in a mythological context, which is distinctly Indian, yet transcends cultural borders, all the while showing the illusory nature of those imposed by history and gender.” The important contributions of women in the personal and royal/ administrative arena/affairs are highlighted for their opinion and intellectual power. Her protagonist, Draupadi, is a courageous, outspoken, and decisive person who can question authority. She protests by arguing: “I’m a queen—daughter of King Drupad, Sister of Drshtadymana, 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).

Her secret desire for Karna is Divakaruni's most shocking innovation. Ojha and Gorasya (2019) find that “Divakaruni has not attempted anything new which was not there in Vyasa’s *Mahabharata*, but the epic has been reshaped in such a way that it appeals to the modern reader” (152). Pratibha Ray’s book *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* (1995) also presents her character in a balanced manner, where the reader can see deeper aspects of her personality.

Draupadi challenges the double standard of patriarchs by pointing out the chastity of men: “Chaste woman! Unchaste woman! In the same way, why don’t the scriptures speak of chaste men and unchaste men? Are men’s hearts made of gold that sin cannot tarnish them” (94)? Mahashweta Devi’s retelling of Draupadi of the Mahabharata is called Dopdi, a rebel, who fights government machinery. The original plot of the narrative is subverted, and instead of acting as a victim, Dopdi Mehjen becomes an agency to leave the men ‘terribly afraid.’ Her unfortunate character is juxtaposed against the original Draupadi, whose honor is saved by Krishna and avenged by her five husbands. Gulati (2024) declares that: “Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Draupadi’ accentuates the quiet confidence of the matriarch narrator as a conscious attempt at imposing authority within the canon’s narrative. “Draupadi” has its beginning in the untold recesses of mute suffering, scathing injustice and discrimination that are inherent in the corrupt class and cast ridden social structure led by the so-called urbanized, educated elite” (297). Chatuvedi (2008) in *The Women of the Mahabharata: The Question of Truth*, argues that: “In the voice of Draupadi, the *Mahabharata* is correcting the disorder that arises from a one-sided emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation, regardless of the time, the place, and the person(s) concerned” (220). Even in her death, he finds Yudhishthira’s observation very touching: “Draupadi died. Nathavati, Anathvati, ‘with husbands, yet destitute’ was never truer of Draupadi than in moments of her death” (265). Luthra (2014) establishes that:

Whereas Sita has been idealized as the perfect wife and woman, resulting in feminist attempts to deconstruct the patriarchal aspects of her representation while retaining admiration for her resilience and dignity and rescuing aspects of her autonomy and voice, with Draupadi, the problem has been to create a wider appreciation of her assertiveness and vocal protest, as well as her anger and thirst for revenge. Feminist writers have attempted to rectify the generally ambivalent attitude toward her as misplaced (148).

## Conclusion

The recent fad of feminist reading of epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* has recreated the women characters neglected in the original narratives. Writers are revisiting these characters with new zeal by giving them a voice to resent the traditional patriarchal setup. These works present a perspective never imagined before, and more contemporary dimensions are given to the characters of Sita and Draupadi to express their innermost ambitions and anxieties. The protagonists' roles in the stories do justice to their understanding of life and critical situations. The subversion in the texts by making alterations in analyzing situations and events has raised many questions. Amish's Sita is inspired by the popularity of contemporary representation in media, where she voices her opinion and sentiments under challenging situations. The masculine traits of her character challenge the traditional femininity and pave the way for a new avatar of womanhood. In the 21st century, the new post-feminist lens helps analyze the agenda of the author who subverted the story to empower Sita's otherwise docile character. These new versions of Sita and Draupadi can be taken as role models for women who are struggling for their rights and a respectable place in society. The multicultural society of the current era demands women of substance who can inspire by example and make a difference in the lives of people around them.

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