



## **Myth, Memory, and Modern Womanhood: Rewriting the Epic Female in the 21st Century in India**

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<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n2.35>

### **Abstract:**

This paper examines how female authors in the 21st century construct retellings of the myths. It compares Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*. Using Elaine Showalter's theory of gynocriticism, Gilbert and Gubar's feminist revisionism, and Jan Assmann's view of cultural memory, this paper examines how 21st-century women writers are reexamining myths and narratives from a different perspective. The study shows how modern women writers take back control of their stories within established epic traditions. The Sita by Volga and Draupadi by Divakaruni are transformed from symbols of virtue and sacrifice into self-aware individuals who navigate desire, agency, and identity. By emphasising personal experience, memory, and female unity, both texts confront the patriarchal structures found in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The paper shows that myths are not just fixed cultural legacies but arenas where ideological struggles are actively carried out.

**Keywords:** Gynocriticism, Cultural Memory, Feminist Revisionism, Epic Retellings, Myth as Ideology, Female Subjectivity.

## Introduction

Myth in Indian culture has been a living narrative for centuries; it does not live just in stories but rather in the imagination of the people and in the culture that shapes their lives. In the 21st century, many authors have started to retell the myths, especially from a female protagonist's view, which Indian myths have lacked throughout centuries. From Sita's lips to Draupadi and Ahalya's, none of the women has ever gotten their voices heard. Yet authors such as Volga and Divakaruni have brought out their voices and placed them inside the contemporary discourse.

Myths have been shaped by the male gaze and context for centuries, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out, "the pen has been in the male hands"(11). Stories are now being told from a gynocentric point of view as women are trying to make sense of the myths that have long shaped their own identity in both home and outside society. They have gained the confidence to subsequently play and stage an intervention. As Patricia Yaeger points out, 'As women play with old texts, the burden of tradition is lightened and shifted; it has the potential of being remade' (18). This has affected the Indian female narrative as many retellings have come up, such as Mahasweta Devi's 'Dopdi' and 'Stanadayani', Yashodhara Mishra's 'Purana Katha', Muppala Ranganayakamma's 'Ramayana Visha Vrikram', Sara Joseph's 'Ramayana Kathakal', Kavita Kane's 'Sita's sister', to name a few.

This paper looks at the two retellings of the myths surrounding Ramayana and Mahabharata from the perspective of Sita and Draupadi. It compares Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*. Divakaruni imagines Draupadi as an independent narrator of her own life who has faced desire, humiliation, trial, moral complexity and political power struggles. This exalts her from a voiceless, passive, collective honour to a woman with independent consciousness. In contrast, Volga have shown Sita to be a woman who grew out of

her only role as a passive supporter of her husband Rama. Through her various meetings with different characters in Ramayana, Sita is finally able to achieve liberation from the shackles that bound her to the title of Rama's consort forever.

Through these retellings, the women rise from passive sufferers to active participants and creators of their own fate. Within these retellings lies the larger literary movement that repositions myth as a lively framework through which contemporary Indian women writers express agency, identity, and awareness of history.

### **Literature Review**

The modern retelling of Indian female characters from myth needs to be understood by following the gynocriticism theory given by Elaine Showalter and then discussed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their book, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (3-44). They emphasise the importance of studying women as creators of literary meaning and not just characters in male-written narratives. By tracing female literary tradition, gynocriticism changes focus from the male perspective to the female narrative, which shows nuanced female identity and expression. This shift is especially relevant to mythological retellings, where women writers reclaim epic narratives that men have traditionally dominated. They give voice to previously silenced experiences.

When epic heroines are rewritten to include psychological depth, moral complexity, and political power, this act challenges established literary authority. This also breaks down the ideological frameworks that have historically restricted them. To understand how this is a significant shift in the social and cultural fabric, Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory needs to be understood. It suggests that there are two kinds of memories: everyday memory and the culturally preserved memory found in texts, rituals, and shared narratives. Indian myths have served as powerful

cultural memory repositories which have repressed and crafted gender roles, values, beliefs and social norms for centuries. Because they are continuously retold and reinterpreted, they remain very relevant sources for creating meaning.

Volga and Divakaruni attempt to create a powerful re-visionist myth-making. It was first suggested by Adrienne Rich, where she says women's writings are 'Re-visioning'. In her words, 'Re-vision– the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us [women] more than a chapter in cultural history, it is an act of survival'(18). After this, revision had featured prominently in women writers' narratives, and feminism has come to mean 'a rethinking of thinking itself' (Held 60).

By reinterpreting narratives, myth is denaturalised and opened to debate. Together, these theoretical perspectives combine to frame mythological rewriting as both a critical and cultural act.

### **Objective and Aim**

The main goal of this paper is to look at how twenty-first-century Indian women writers reinterpret epic female figures to address issues of gender, agency, and modern womanhood. Through a comparative analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, the paper explores how myth serves as an active area for feminist thoughts instead of a fixed cultural legacy. This study has three main objectives. First, it analyses how Draupadi and Sita are reimagined beyond their traditional representations, highlighting their inner thoughts, desires, and political awareness. Second, it examines how these retellings interact with and question the cultural memory found in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Third, it evaluates how myth is a structure that has historically supported patriarchal norms and how women writers are challenging that narrative through their retellings. By placing these retellings

within the frameworks of gynocriticism, feminist revisionism, and cultural memory, it will show how modern authors reclaim narrative authority and reshape female identity within the space of epic traditions.

### **Methodology**

This paper uses a qualitative, interpretative method based on close textual analysis and comparative literary criticism to achieve its goal. It closely examines *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Liberation of Sita* to see how the female perspective reshapes the myths. This analysis draws its conclusion from the theory of gynocriticism, feminist revisionism, and cultural memory. It uses a comparative framework to spot similarities and differences in how Draupadi and Sita are represented throughout the retellings. Instead of seeing myth as fixed source material, this study views these retellings as conversations with classic epics and their social and cultural impacts that can still be felt viscerally by women of India.

### **Analysis**

Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* retells the Ramayana not with grand scenes or heroic deeds but through conversations that subtly challenge traditional ideas. It catalogues Sita's various encounters with women from Ramayana and her road to liberation for herself at the end of that journey. Sita is not a passive voiceless narrator who waits for Rama to save her in this narrative created by Volga, but a woman fully capable of protecting herself and taking hold of her own destiny.

Volga strikingly begins the narrative by making Sita friends with Surpanakha, the sister of Ravana, and from here the entire myth begins. Surpanakha was brutalised by Lakshmana, yet she has achieved happiness in life; she confesses to Sita that, "I've realised that the meaning of

success for a woman does not lie in her relationship with a man” (13). A striking and dangerous thought for a woman, as society does not yet sanction this belief even in the 21st century. In a society where women aren't even allowed to protect themselves, even when they are capable, it breaks the mould and questions the myth of Ramayana from the first few pages of the narrative.

Volga, in her narrative, shows how Rama himself, who is against Sita being able to protect herself, as he says, “Protecting you like an eyelid protects the eye...the thought that I’m protecting you gives me greater pride and pleasure than sovereignty over Ayodhya” (71). Yet in the next moment, when Sita has declared that she can protect herself, it is Rama who forbade her from ever doing that. Then the question arises, which is aptly asked by the author Volga subtly in the story, what happens when such protection is gone from a woman’s life, as Renuka effectively pointed out once to Sita, “A woman thinks she doesn’t have a world other than that of her husband’s. True. But some day that very husband will tell her that there is no place for her in his world. Then what’s left for her ?” (52).

Volga questions through her narrative a society where women must remain passive and helpless and wait to be protected instead of protecting themselves when they are fully capable of doing so. Throughout the narrative, the author made it extremely clear that Women must liberate themselves. As Urmila advises Sita, “Power is not the root cause of all sorrow...we must acquire this power. And then give it up. I shall not submit to anyone’s power. Nor will I bind anyone with my power. Then I will feel I’ve liberated myself“(77). The stories show us glimpses from Sita as an unmarried woman in love with Rama to a young Queen, and then her trials, eventual motherhood and exile. Sita starts as a woman who is unable to grasp that there would be a life for a woman beyond motherhood and her husband, yet by the end of the narrative, she is finally able to liberate herself from the shackles that chained her to Rama and her sons. As Volga points out,

it was only able to happen because Sita met all the women who had been pushed aside as minor female characters in the vast myth of “Ramayana”, “The day Rama demanded a trial by fire, the day he sent her away into the forest, Sita remembered...Ahalya, Renuka, Sita—they were all victims of mistrust and humiliation”(61).

Volga has also shown how, while trying to liberate herself throughout the journey, Sita has questioned multiple times her own identity as she has felt lost in every sense of the word. Sita’s pain in trying to liberate herself from the clutches of patriarchy and a society that sacrifices women’s honour and makes them a victim can be felt deeply when Sita breaks down and questions Ahalya, “What is ‘I’, sister? Who am I ?”(38). However, Sita finally gains liberation from her shackles as she calmly refuses to participate in the spectacle of declaring to the court of Rama that she is “innocent”. In the end, it is Rama himself who gets his own liberation through their sons left by Sita. Ultimately proving that she is the protector and not the other way around.

Draupadi, on the other hand, is written very differently compared to Sita. Where Sita is all about liberation, Draupadi is all about claiming one’s fate and fame. Draupadi does not turn away from life; rather, she wants to live it in vivid detail. Draupadi speaks to the readers like a living being and not a character from a myth; she has weaknesses and flaws and a temper just like a normal woman. She’s argumentative and critical about the shackles placed on her by society, and all the while yearns for a life beyond her palace and dreams of falling in love. Draupadi’s thoughts on being shared among her five husbands after her marriage show her thoughts on the transactional nature of marriage and polyandry. While the epic shows her fate as divine, through her narration, the audience realises it is less of a fate and more of a political bargain which suppresses the agency and narratives of females.

The thread of desire runs through the entire novel. Here, Draupadi is attracted to Karna, who is portrayed as her emotional and intellectual equal; she rejects him at her *swayamvar*, partly out of pride and partly out of her brother's safety. This complicates the narrative of the story by making her question morality, loyalty, righteousness and fate. Draupadi is as bound to fate as the others in her life, yet she yearns to be free. In the course of the novel, Draupadi has been counselled by a sorceress that, "forget about love, princess. Pleasure is simpler, and duty more important. Learn to be satisfied with them" (Divakaruni 63). Yet Draupadi rejects that advice, deciding she is fated for love too, yet in the course of the novel, we are shown how her desire for Karna becomes another shackle upon her heart, even though Karna is the one who is emotionally and intellectually her equal. It is only after her liberation from life that she can join Karna. Draupadi also meets Shikhand, who was her sister but is now her brother, and is told that "power of a woman moves aslant, like a serpent seeking its prey" (Divakaruni 52). Draupadi doesn't understand what Shikhandi means, but she remembers them, and realises in the course of time that Shikhandi was trying to tell her to be strong in the face of her fate. Draupadi is not only critical of her husbands and society around her, but she is also critical of her own actions and the fallouts of those. Draupadi by Divakaruni has been written as a character who is critical of everyone from the first few pages of the novel, as she says while talking about her brother's name, "Dhri's name...if I were his parents, I might have picked a more cheerful appellation" (Divakaruni 5). However, she is more critical about her own name, as in the next instance she thinks, "But Daughter of Drupad?...couldn't my father have come up with something a little less egoistic?...in the long run, it would not do. I needed a more heroic name" (Divakaruni 5). Throughout the novel, Draupadi has shown how women are nothing but pawns in the political

scenario of the kingdom, and even if the woman is innocent and the war has many causes, it is her name that is called the person who started the great war.

### **Findings**

The findings of this study show that modern Indian feminist retellings of epic narratives not only reinterpret myth but also fundamentally change the narrative authority, cultural memory, and ideological meaning. Both Volga and Divakaruni find what Elaine Showalter calls gynocritical reclamation of female textual authority through their retelling of the two epics. In the traditional epic of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Sita and Draupadi serve as the passive narrators and place holders for the male valour, heroism and moral complexity, but in the retellings, this idea is flipped, and instead, we get two female perspectives with their own voice and narratives that show the epic from their point of view. Draupadi recounts her own emotional and political history in the first person. Sita's liberation unfolds through thoughtful conversations and personal reflection. This move from woman-as-symbol to woman-as-narrator marks a significant change; female experience is no longer filtered through patriarchal storytelling but becomes the foundation of the narrative.

The findings also show that these rewritings embody feminist revisionism as described by Gilbert and Gubar. Traditional patriarchal epics often reduce women to two roles—the virtuous wife or the dangerous rebel. Sita is revered as pure and submissive, Surpanakha is mutilated and mocked, and Draupadi swings between being a divine queen and a source of disaster. Both authors challenge these simplistic roles through their retellings. Volga gives Surpanakha and Ahalya depth and real experience. Divakaruni complicates Draupadi's virtue by highlighting her desire for Karna and her frustration at sharing her life with five husbands. The narratives created by Volga and Divakaruni break these two roles and fragment the patriarchal epics, which

ultimately results in feminist revisionism or what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar call 'the Queen's Looking Glass' (3).

These retellings of mythical women also act as interventions in cultural memory, connecting to Jan Assmann's ideas about communicative and cultural memory. Ramayana and Mahabharata are not just epics; they are cultural identities and norm makers which have created our gender identities, roles and social structures for centuries. This authority comes from being repeated in rituals and social institutions. By retelling these myths, Volga and Divakaruni have thrown new perspectives into those old stories. Volga reinterprets the trial by fire as a public spectacle rooted in political concern, not divine approval. Divakaruni transforms the dice hall episode from a moral lesson into a moment of deep humiliation. These retellings of the events show how the events of the epics can be reinterpreted. Cultural memory is not a fixed idea, but it is a flexible identity and norms that can be changed and carried forward in keeping with the changes happening in society over time.

The findings suggest that while both texts reshape epic women, they offer different models of modern womanhood. Volga's Sita finds her freedom through stepping back. She decides not to return to Ayodhya, which represents a withdrawal from the society and values of Queenship, reputation, and moral oversight. Here, modern womanhood is about inner sovereignty, about self-identity that goes beyond institutional or social approval. In contrast, Divakaruni's Draupadi does not retreat; she speaks up and criticises. Her modernity lies in her ability to express herself. She remains caught up in desire, ambition, and memories, but gains power through her storytelling. If Sita represents detachment from patriarchal ideology, Draupadi displays resistance within it.

The findings of this study also show how the modern retelling of myth in India by female writers focuses on the reinterpretation of the events and the traditions rather than outright fighting the patriarchy and breaking it down. Both *The Liberation of Sita* and *The Palace of Illusions* show how myth has a strong grasp on Indian society; the authority of its cultural significance can be questioned. The analysis shows that the retellings do not reject the epic structures but rather show a shift in the perspective. Both narratives change Sita and Draupadi from cultural symbols to individuals with their own autonomy. When Sita refuses to return to the court of Rama, and Draupadi narrates her own experience of her humiliation, the myth does not hold a single male narrative voice anymore; the epics shatter into multiple tiny, fragmented voices and switch each of their own narratives and experiences and stories to tell. One important insight from this study is that feminist retellings do not aim for historical accuracy but for justice in understanding. This also supports the gynocriticism view of focusing on the experience of the women; it goes beyond that. These retellings not only include women's experiences but also raise questions on topics such as chastity, obedience, and sacrifice. These were once accepted as a natural burden of women, but they are shown to be ideological ideas placed on women's shoulders by society itself.

However, the two texts suggest two different paths to liberation. Volga's Sita renounces and steps away from the symbolic world of kingship and moral judgment. She is ethical, and thus her liberation is about self-determination. In contrast, Divakaruni's Draupadi stays inside the power structure but refuses to be silent. Her strength is her narrative and her criticism of the social order around her. By sharing her voice and thoughts through her narrative, she takes back the power that was denied to her by society. One of the striking insights from this comparative study that can be found is that both texts make epic grandeur more human. Rama seems limited by political

pressures and is shown to have no agency of his own under the burden of kingship and Arya Dharma. The Pandavas reveal flaws and doubt; dharma appears negotiable instead of unchangeable. This demystifies the epics and makes them ethically relevant to today's readers.

### **Conclusion**

This study shows that modern feminist retellings of Indian epics do more than reinterpret myth; they reshape the cultural and ideological foundations of epic womanhood. 'The Palace of Illusion' and 'The Liberation of Sita' both show how the two mythological figures of Sita and Draupadi change from symbols to humans with their own voices and struggles, strengths and flaws. Using the ideas of gynocriticism, feminist revisionism, and cultural memory, the paper reveals that these texts reclaim narrative power while challenging patriarchal norms in epic tradition. Both authors engage with the narrative rather than rejecting it, and bring out a critical reading of the myths that show that cultural memory is not fixed but responds to new ethical and political issues. This rewriting of the epic female becomes a strong literary strategy through which modern Indian women writers express their agency and historical awareness. This way, myth does not remain a rigid inheritance but acts as a flexible framework that is constantly reshaped by those willing to retell it.

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