Silenced Voices, Reclaimed Myths: Gender and Resistance in Indian Literary Reinterpretations

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of myth, ideology, and gender within Indian literature, focusing on how feminist writers reinterpret and subvert traditional myths that historically upheld patriarchal values. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Alan Swingewood and Terry Eagleton, the paper analyzes the portrayal of mythological figures such as Sita, Gandhari, Draupadi, and Ahalya. Through the works of Bina Aggarwal, Githa Hariharan, Mahasweta Devi, and K. B. Sreedevi, it reveals a process of "remythification," where the original, patriarchal myths are deconstructed and replaced by narratives that foreground women's agency, critique systemic oppression, and challenge societal norms. Ultimately, the study highlights how literature can transform sites of cultural oppression into spaces of resistance and empowerment.

Keywords: myth; feminism; Indian literature; patriarchy; subversion; reinterpretation; remythification

This paper explores the intricate relationship between **myth and gender** and critically examines how mythology has historically been manipulated by patriarchy to perpetuate women's subordination. By presenting women with idealized role models and defining moral codes, patriarchy uses myth as an instrument to institutionalize its ideology. However, literary texts have emerged that challenge these narratives, offering reinterpretations from a **feminist perspective** and subverting stereotypical portrayals of women in mythology.

The term *myth*, often understood as stories transmitted across generations, holds a deeper ideological function. Alan Swingewood (1977) argues that myth serves "to eliminate the historical basis of institutions and processes and create within popular consciousness an acceptance of the inevitable facts of class inequality and power" (p. 119). This underscores the inextricable link between myth and ideology. Terry Eagleton (1976) further explains ideology as "that complex structure of social perception which ensures that the situation in which one social class has power over the others is seen by most members of the society as 'natural' or not seen at all" (p. 6).

By shaping cultural consciousness, myth becomes a powerful tool for patriarchy (the dominant group) to reinforce its ideals onto women (the subordinate group). Mythic narratives create contrasting archetypes: the *good* woman—submissive, patient, self-sacrificing—and the *bad* woman—assertive, independent, and therefore condemned. Sita from the *Ramayana* epitomizes the former, revered for her chastity and unwavering devotion; whereas Surpanakha symbolizes the latter, vilified for her sexual assertiveness.

Yet, as history shows, myths are also contested spaces. Control over myth is vital for cultural negotiation and the dismantling of patriarchal hegemony. Feminist writers have sought to **demythify** canonical myths, replacing oppressive narratives with empowering reinterpretations.

Reimagining Sita: A Voice of Protest

Among Hindu mythological figures, Sita remains the quintessential ideal of womanhood. Her silent suffering and ultimate self-sacrifice have been valorized through centuries. Yet Bina Aggarwal's poem *Sita Speak* reclaims Sita's voice, urging her to articulate her story beyond imposed silence. Aggarwal critiques not only Sita's passive endurance but the very structures that demanded it:

"Your father married you to a prince / told you to be pliable as the bow / in your husband's hand" (p. 104).

By invoking the bow that Ram breaks to win Sita, Aggarwal creates a potent metaphor: as the bow was "broken," so too was Sita's spirit, crushed by the demand for unwavering obedience. The poem further condemns the complicity of male figures—Ram, Laxman, and even Sita's sons—who uphold patriarchal codes at Sita's expense:

"Their lineage was accepted / Yet your purity still questioned" (p. 104).

Ultimately, the poet demands an explanation for Sita's silence, challenging the glorification of her sacrifice:

"How did they silence you?" (p. 104).

Gandhari Revisited: Silent Protest or Defiance?

Traditionally, Gandhari is revered for voluntarily blindfolding herself to share her husband Dhritarashtra's blindness—a symbol of supreme wifely devotion. Githa Hariharan, in *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), subverts this narrative. Through the character of Sita, who gives up playing the Veena under patriarchal pressure, Hariharan suggests Gandhari's blindfold could be an act of silent rebellion rather than passive conformity. Later, when Sita resumes playing the Veena, she symbolically discards the Gandhari-like persona:

"She took up the Veena again… and opened her eyes to those parts of her personality which she had tried to deny and suppress" (p. 103).

Thus, what appears as sacrifice is reinterpreted as a layered, complex negotiation of agency.

Draupadi: Beyond Divine Protection

Draupadi, bold and outspoken in the *Mahabharata*, resists patriarchal degradation. Yet her heroism is often overshadowed in popular culture. Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* (1990) reimagines Draupadi as Dopdi Mehjen, a tribal revolutionary. Unlike the mythical Draupadi, who is saved by divine intervention, Dopdi faces brutal sexual violence without hope of rescue. Yet she reclaims power by refusing shame:

"You can strip me," she tells Senanayak, "but how can you clothe me again?" (p. 104).

Her defiance exposes the brutality of patriarchy, transforming victimhood into resistance.

Ahalya: Rejecting False Redemption

Ahalya's myth, where she is turned into stone and later redeemed by Ram, also reflects patriarchal control. K. B. Sreedevi's story *The Stone Woman* (1993) dismantles this narrative. Initially awed by Ram's compassion, Ahalya's faith shatters upon learning that he abandoned his pregnant wife, Sita:

"The fire has abandoned its own flame," she laments, questioning his integrity (p. 52).

Rather than accept salvation from another unjust man, Ahalya chooses to turn back into stone, aligning herself with Sita against patriarchal judgment. This act asserts that women should not depend on male approval for redemption.

Conclusion

Through these literary works, writers have contested and subverted entrenched mythological stereotypes. This process reflects what scholars describe as re- mythification: deconstructing oppressive myths and reconstructing them to reflect women's agency and critique patriarchal norms. These narratives thus resist being passive recipients of tradition and become active sites of ideological struggle, reclaiming myth as a space of empowerment.

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