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Myth and Modernity: Rewriting Indian Epics in Contemporary English Poetry

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Abstract:
The ancient Indian epics The Ramayana and the Mahabharata have long shaped South Asia's cultural imagination, embedding ideals of duty, sacrifice, and heroism. In contemporary times, Indian English poets have reinterpreted these narratives within postcolonial and globalized contexts. Their rewritings do not merely replicate traditional plots but instead reframe them to address pressing modern concerns such as gender politics, nationalism, identity, and ecological crisis. By deploying free verse, narrative experimentation, irony, and hybrid forms, poets like Arun Kolatkar, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Meena Alexander, and Arundhathi Subramaniam infuse mythic material with feminist, postcolonial, philosophical, and political resonances. Kolatkar's Sarpa Satra retells the snake-sacrifice episode as an allegory of communal violence, while Nair's Ayodhya Cantos overlays epic motifs onto the Babri Masjid demolition. Alexander relocates Sita into diasporic Manhattan, transforming exile into a metaphor of immigrant identity, while Subramaniam invokes figures like Draupadi and Avvaiyar to critique patriarchy and reimagine women's voices. Collectively, these poets engage in a dialogue between Indic tradition and modern dissent, transforming myth into a living text that interrogates contemporary society. This study demonstrates how the epics, far from being static heritage, are reinhabited in English poetry as dynamic instruments for cultural critique and identity-formation.

Keywords: AIE, RIE, English poetry, women's voices

Introduction:

This paper delineates a cultural history of modern Hinduism in conversation with contemporary Indian literature. Its central focus is literary adaptations of the Sanskrit epic the Mahabharata, in English, Hindi, and Bengali. Among Hindu religious texts, this epic has been most persistently reproduced in literary and popular discourses because its scale matches the grandeur of the Indian national imagination. Further, many epic adaptations explicitly invite devotion to the nation, often emboldening conservative Hindu nationalism. This interdisciplinary project draws its methodology from literary theory, history, gender, and religious studies.

"India, a nation! What an apotheosis! Last comer to the drab nineteenth-century sisterhood! Waddling in at this hour of the world to take her seat! She, whose only peer was the Holy Roman Empire, shall rank with Guatemala and Belgium, perhaps!" –(E.M. Forster, A Passage to India, 361)

The ancient epics of India – especially the Ramayana and the Mahabharata – have been a living part of South Asia's cultural memory, shaping values of duty, heroism, and sacrifice for millennia. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, a new wave of English-language Indian poets has begun to rethink these

epics. Writing in a postcolonial, globalized context, they invoke Ramayana and Mahabharata characters and images in modern modes: free verse, narrative poetry, and hybrid forms. As one scholar notes, "The Mahabharata and the Ramayana are more than literary works. They have occupied a huge space in the collective psyche of the Indian masses" and have "permeated all kinds of discourse". Retellings in English must thus do more than repeat familiar plots; they must "move the already familiar story into an untrodden plane" Contemporary poets achieve this by straddling tradition and innovation – rewriting mythic episodes to comment on today's gender politics, nationalism, identity crises, and ecological anxieties.

Modern Indian poets written in English typically infuse mythic references with feminist, postcolonial, philosophical, and political themes. For example, feminist poets reclaim Sita and Draupadi to explore female agency; nationalist poets recast Rama and Arjuna amid communal conflict; and philosophical poets use the epics' cycle of violence to question modern extremism. The tension between an epic past and a modern present is explicit in these works. Arun Kolatkar's "Sarpa Satra" (2004) exemplifies the approach: it retells the Mahabharata's snake-sacrifice narrative "in modern idiom" and present tense, linking an ancient ritual to contemporary communal . Rukmini Bhaya Nair's Ayodhya Cantos (1999) weaves Vishnu, Hanuman, and Sita into an allegorical drama of the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition, "skilfully moving between the planes of myth and history" Meena Alexander's poems transpose Sita into urban America, conflating Ramayana lore with immigrant. Arundhathi Subramaniam invokes Avvaiyar and Draupadi to critique patriarchal values as she "spares no one" – even the gods – from satire borderless journal.comborderlessjournal.com.

This essay examines how contemporary Indian English poets draw on the Ramayana and Mahabharata to speak to modern issues. It will show how each poet rewrites mythic material: deploying irony, shifting viewpoints, and mixing genres. In doing so they create a dialogue between "Indic traditions" and "feminist self-awareness", between ancient dharma and modern dissent. Throughout, we will look closely at representative poems by Meena Alexander, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Arundhathi Subramaniam, Arun Kolatkar, and others, paying attention to feminist, postcolonial, philosophical, and political readings. Where possible we quote the poems and their critics. The analysis will show that modern Indian poets use myth not as static heritage but as living scripture – a lens to critique contemporary society and reshape identities.

Tradition and Innovation in Epic Retellings

Indian literature has a long tradition of retelling epic stories for new audiences. The Sanskrit epics themselves were transmitted orally long before being fixed in verse. Over the centuries, countless regional tellings and translations emerged (for example, Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas, Kamban's Ramavataram, Kathasaritsagara's stories, etc.). In a sense, every generation has reimagined the epics according to its own needs. As Dalit poet and critic Meena Kandasamy has noted about epic tales, "myth is neither fixed nor monolithic" but is continually recastiajesm.in.

Similarly, modern Indian English poetry treats mythic narrative as malleable. The poet and critic David Krausman observes that Arun Kolatkar's Sarpa Satra is notable precisely because it uses an epic narrative to "bring out issues that are specific to our times"(tabjournal.org.) In Krausman's words, Kolatkar takes the ritual of Janamejaya's snake-sacrifice – originally a motive for vengeance in the Mahabharata – and makes it an allegory of modern communal. In Kolatkar's hands the medieval sacraficial fire becomes a metaphor for contemporary hatred; the epic characters are infused with present-day concerns. Likewise, as scholars note, any retelling today "moves the already familiar story into an untrodden plane" This

requires two things: preserving the allusive power of myth and simultaneously inflecting it with new perspective.

For example, Kolatkar writes his narration in present tense and casual, even irreverent language. As Nachiket Joshi observes in Scroll.in, Kolatkar's poem is "an irreverent, heterodox version that both deploys and subverts the original tale"scroll.in. The very opening lines of Sarpa Satra (Janamejaya's account) are spoken in plain modern English – "It was a scheming snake, I'm told, with a grudge against my great-grandfather that killed my father." – collapsing centuries of storytelling into a tone of colloquial skepticism. This move to the "modern idiom" is deliberate: the poet "makes it absolutely clear that his main concern is with his own times rather than a mythical past"tabjournal.org. In one stroke Kolatkar turns the distant world of kings and ascetics into a mirror of contemporary society, where security-state paranoia, media hype, and commodity capitalism are the new backdrop.

Similarly, Rukmini Bhaya Nair's Ayodhya Cantos takes the holy city of Ramayana lore and reimagines it on the eve of a political crisis. As a publisher's note explains, the cycle of poems is "an ironic meditation upon a significant moment of our times – the destruction of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992" Nair weaves mythic figures (Vishnu, Hanuman, Sita) into a metaphoric drama that "culminates in the events of 6 December" In other words, she overlays ancient epic motifs onto late-20th-century India, showing how history and legend collide. The narrative structure itself is "cosmic and contemporary"epic gods converse about politics, and the sacred past becomes a commentary on modern citizenship.

Even the language of these poems blends old and new. Many writers explicitly mix Sanskrit or Hindi vocabulary with English, or use hybrid imagery. As a recent study of Indian English women's poetry notes, English – once the colonizer's language – has become "a tool for resistance and empowerment." Indian poets "skillfully blend Indian idioms, symbols, and metaphors into English verse," creating a linguistic hybridity that exposes patriarchal and colonial normsiajesm.in. Arundhathi Subramaniam's line "I wear my silence like a borrowed sari"iajesm.in is a concise example: here the Hindi word sari enters an English sentence as a symbol of layered tradition and power. By refusing to choose between mythic past and modern medium, these poets forge new forms: free-verse epic episodes, dramatic monologues of legendary women, even playful midrashim that wink at both tradition and postmodern play.

Key Points on Innovation: Poets retell epics in modern English verse by:

- Writing in present-day idiom (e.g. Kolatkar's vernacular in Sarpa Satratabjournal.org)
- Shifting narrative voice (e.g. female or minor characters narrate epic events)scroll.in
- Blending genres (poetry + mythic drama + political essay)
- Introducing irony and skepticism (as Joshi remarks, Kolatkar's tone is "irreverent"
- Infusing local or feminist symbols (like Avvaiyar's sari in Subramaniam's).

This tension – of honoring a canonical story while bending it – is central to myth and modernity. As one commentator puts it, the new poetry does not "reject the past but reshape it to make space for a more empowered and inclusive future"iajesm.in. The patriarchal epic world is thus upended: goddesses are no longer mere prizes or metaphors, but subjects who "make meaning" of their own. We now turn to how these feminist and political re-readings work in practice.

Feminist Retellings: Women's Voices and Agency:-

A particularly vivid strand of this poetry is its feminist re-imagining of epic heroines. Traditionally, characters like Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, and Surpanakha have been portrayed within patriarchal frames – the

dutiful wife, the chaste queen, the jealous sister-in-law. Contemporary women poets challenge these roles by giving voice and agency to the female figures. They explore how mythic women might tell their own stories, or how their symbolisms can critique modern patriarchy.

Sita Reimagined:

Sita, the central female figure of the Ramayana, is a prime target for feminist rewrites. In the epic Sita's virtue is tested by exile and fire, and she ultimately consents to proving her purity in a trial by fire. Modern poets often reverse or deepen this narrative. Meena Alexander, in her memoir-poetry Atmospheric Embroidery, recalls learning the Sita story as a child, but then recasts Sita's fate across continents. In one passage she imagines Sita being "cast out by her lordly husband Rama" so literally that "the earth… tore open to give her refuge"nupress.northwestern.edu. But Alexander places Sita in Manhattan: through "the crevices of Inwood marble," the exiled princess emerges "in metamorphic orm"nupress.northwestern.edu. In other words, Sita resurrects not in Valmiki's India, but in urban America.

Alexander even wrote a poem called "Inwood Sita" (in her Indian Ocean Blues cycle) which enacts this vision. The poem's imagery mixes natural and urban: "Sita bathed in sand… Fire starts – Dry ground cracks, Swallows her whole. Sita – found – in – a – field / Fled to Inwood."meenaalexander.commons.gc.cuny.edu The mythical husband Rama in the poem is present only to cast her out: "Rama cast her out, Lava storms cooled her…"meenaalexander.commons.gc.cuny.edu. The powerful moment comes when Sita, now in the Harlem neighborhood of Manhattan (Inwood/Dyckman Street), "slips into a manhole" and "Waves at me."meenaalexander.commons.gc.cuny.edu. Alexander's Sita thus goes underground, literally blending with modern infrastructure. The epic's theme of exile and refuge becomes a metaphor for immigrant experience: Sita's disappearance echoes the often invisible lives of women of color in the city. Through this, Alexander comments on identity and memory: "Disparate worlds merge in a shimmering whole," she writes, "which is what memory mingling with desire can sometimes grant us"nupress.northwestern.edu. Her diaspora metaphor is clear – Sita's own naming is part of the immigrant's search for home and self.

This approach – relocating a goddess – opens feminist questions. Sita's original narrative is of obedience and purity, but Alexander's Sita is transgressive and alive. By making Sita surface in a New York street, Alexander symbolically rewrites Sita's passive ending: she is no longer swallowed by earth permanently, but emerges on modern ground. The poem ends with a living Sita who waves goodbye, perhaps at the speaker, suggesting solidarity or farewell. In Alexander's hands, Sita becomes a figure of resilience and solidarity with exiled women, bridging the personal (the poet's South Asian immigrant life) with the mythic. The myth is not abandoned; rather, it is refracted through a new lens – global feminism. As Alexander herself notes, mythology in her work often transforms into "palimpsest of time" on which "we scrawl ourselves" In summary, Alexander uses Sita to explore gender and belonging, "slipping between the lines of separate nations" and making new space for a diasporic woman's

Voices of Female Resistances

Other poets also spotlight sidelined women. In Kolatkar's Sarpa Satra, the poet does not only use a female perspective; he centers it. The mythological voice of Jaratkaru – a naga woman – is the only dissenting conscience in the poem's second half. As Joshi explains, after Janamejaya's advisors urge genocide, "In the absence of dissent from any of the mainstream characters, Jaratkaru – a snake woman – emerges as the narratorial voice". From Jaratkaru's viewpoint, the sacrifice is seen through the eyes of its victims.

Her commentary is infused with compassion and irony. When she curses Takshaka (the snake who killed the king's father), her words recast violence as cowardice: "It only shows what cowards / all terrorists are / behind their snarling ferocious masks." Through Jaratkaru, Kolatkar collapses heroic vengeance into human cowardice, using a female (female-identified) voice to indict male aggression. In effect, the poem gives agency to a mythic woman who was silent in the original.

Rukmini Nair similarly elevates female characters. In the Ayodhya Cantos, after the allegory of Ayodhya unfolds, the second section is titled "Gargi's Silence." Gargi was a legendary Vedic sage renowned for her intellectual prowess. Nair explains that naming her section for Gargi (literally, a "woman with intellectual yearnings") signals a shift to women's This section of poems "communicates Nair's passionate concern for and empathy with issues relating to women" Gargi's presence evokes a cultural history of female wisdom. The choice of Gargi suggests that modern Indian women, like Gargi, must find their voice amid patriarchal silence. In this way Nair connects feminist thought to ancient feminist figures, showing continuity of women's intellectual agency.

Arundhathi Subramaniam, another leading poet, uses mythic women in her poetry. One example is her poem "The Fine Art of Ageing," which imagines the archetypal wise woman Avvaiyar, a celebrated Tamil poetess. In this poem, Avvaiyar is addressing youthful grandiosity. She flatly rejects the epic archetype of Draupadi, the "youthful wife to five princes". The poem declares: "Spare me the glamour of being youthful wife to five princes – Draupadi, the fruit everyone wants to peel."borderlessjournal.com. Here Subramaniam links Draupadi's myth with the emptiness of social expectation – the desire to be a desirable consort – and discards it. Instead, Avvaiyar chooses another path: "fearless friend to gods, ally of peasants, counselor to kings, traveler of the darkest streets, she walks the world alone."borderlessjournal.com. This stance is revolutionary; Avvaiyar refuses both female celebrity (glamour, sainthood) and subservience, opting for independent wisdom. By invoking a legendary female poet rather than an epic heroine, Subramaniam critiques patriarchy's limited roles for women. A short maxim punctuates the conclusion: "and on such a path…it's best to be a crone. These lines repurpose myth: they replace Draupadi's youth and grandeur with an elderly woman's agency. Subramaniam thus uses epic images to champion female dignity at every age, criticizing society's glorification of youth and beauty.

In all these examples, mythic women cease to be mere "metaphors" of ideals; they become makers of meaning in their own. Contemporary poets give them new identities: exiles, sages, survivors. The effects are explicitly feminist: as one critic summarizes, Indian women poets today "negotiate" two traditions – the sexualized imagery of colonialism and the often-traditional imagery of Hindu myth – to carve out a feminine spaceiajesm.in. They use those very images to question gender norms. For instance, Subramaniam's sari-silence metaphor ("borrowed sari") both recalls traditional femininity and transforms it into a symbol of quiet resistance. In short, modern poets wrest control of mythic female figures, reinterpreting their stories to reflect contemporary women's strengths and struggles.

Postcolonial and Nationalist Perspective:

The Indian epics have always been tied to ideas of nation and culture. In modern India, however, these connections have become fraught. The Ramayana in particular has been invoked by Hindu nationalist movements to imagine a "Ram Rajya" (ideal Hindu state). Consequently, poets rewriting epic lore often address issues of identity and nationhood. They question how a shared myth is used to include or exclude. A striking case is again Nair's Ayodhya Cantos. The book's central allegory is of the Babri Masjid demolition – a real event in Ayodhya, Rama's mythic birthplace. By juxtaposing the fate of Hanuman,

Sita, and Vishnu with the demolition of a mosque, Nair comments on communalism. The interplay of myth and history suggests that ancient symbols (the bow of Rama, the bridge to Lanka, etc.) were invoked to justify modern politics. The very imagery of gods "culminating in the events of 6 December" makes the point: mythic nostalgia can be (and was) mobilized for sectarian But Nair's poetry does not celebrate that; instead, it exposes the tragedy. As one review notes, her verses create a "national allegory" that offers a "strikingly new perspective" on the Babri Ayodhya She uses Hanuman (the monkey god) and Sita (the ideal princess) almost as commentators, allowing the reader to see the pathos of a nation divided by myth.
Arun Kolatkar tackles nationalism more head-on, using Mahabharata's Sarpa Satra episode as a political critique. The motive for the mythic snake-sacrifice was vengeance on a single serpent; Kolatkar amplifies it into a satire on collective hatred. Krausman explains that Kolatkar deliberately chose a "sacred text like the Mahabharata (which is used by Hindu fundamentalists)" and subverted it into an allegory of "communal massacres" In Sarpa Satra, King Janamejaya is portrayed as a paranoid militarist ("You do not have permission to read this"), complete with "secret police" and "crocodiles equipped with night vision" – direct analogies to modern . The war council in the poem even debates who will profit from building the sacrificial chamber, treating genocide as a business contract. In short, the epic's glorification of revenge becomes the poet's indictment of extremist nationalism.
Kolatkar's English is pointed: for example, as he describes the sacrificial fire he writes that Agni (the fire god) is turned into "a common assassin, butcher, or a mass murderer". In the original epic the snake-sacrifice is a solemn yajna, but Kolatkar reinterprets it as "the very opposite" – a gratuitous vengeance. His character Jaratkaru underscores this shift by asking, "Don't you know / that true revenge accepts no substitute?. The poem thus interrogates the sacred ritual, showing how it has been co-opted into ideological violence. This reflects a postcolonial concern: how religious stories can be twisted by political forces.
Another political theme is national identity vs. alienation. Diaspora poets like Alexander also engage this. Alexander, speaking of her own identity, writes that growing up she felt her languages were "shot out one ear and the English around me changed utterly"nupress.northwestern.edu. She learned to navigate multiple languages and cultures. In one reflection she says her body is "marked as that of a person of color… drawn in, longing to be part of a whole, yet time and again cast out"nupress.northwestern.edu. The epic Sita, in Alexander's hands, becomes a metaphor for this postcolonial ambivalence. Sita's exile resonates with the alienation of an immigrant. By reviving Sita in Manhattan, Alexander creates a dialogue between Indian heritage and American reality. The old stories become a way to negotiate hybrid identity.
More broadly, modern poets use epics to comment on nation-building myths. For instance, Arundhathi Subramaniam's invocation of Avvaiyar (in The Fine Art of Ageing) can be read politically too. Avvaiyar rejects kingship and caste distinctions ("ally of peasants, counselor to kings") in favor of universal This suggests a humane alternative to hierarchical nationalism. Similarly, Rukmini Nair's line "The woman is not a metaphor anymore; she is the maker of meaning"iajesm.in can be read as a political statement: the old metaphors of nation (Ram as the king, Sita as virtuous woman) are no longer absolute; contemporary citizens (women especially) must create new meanings for these symbols.
Thus in these poems, myth becomes a battleground for postcolonial debate: who owns the story of Rama or Krishna? Are the epics emancipatory narratives or reactionary ones? The poets are clear that the political mythologies must be questioned. As one scholar notes, by "intertwining the wisdom of Indic traditions with feminist self-awareness," these poets "reconstruct narratives long dominated by patriarchal voices"iajesm.in. By invoking epics in modern political contexts, the poets are essentially demythologizing nationalist uses of myth, insisting that these stories belong to all, not just a monolith.

Philosophical and Ethical Dimension

Beyond gender and politics, modern poets often tap into the philosophical depth of the epics, using them to ponder ethics, memory, and the human condition. The Mahabharata in particular is itself a meditation on violence, duty, and the fragility of justice – and contemporary writers link these themes to modern quandaries.

Kolatkar's Sarpa Satra again provides rich material. By showing the endless cycle of vengeance, the poem becomes a paradoxical meditation on dharma (righteousness). One key structural insight in Kolatkar's version is the "reflexive structure" he inherits from Vyasa: the snake-sacrifice is not only a standalone myth but is implicitly tied to the beginning of the Mahabharata war. Joshi points out that Kolatkar makes this explicit: Janamejaya's obsession mirrors all the earlier bloodshed. After detailing the trauma of Khandava Forest (where Krishna and Arjuna burned innocents), the poem later shows Janamejaya's genocide. The looping effect is chilling: "all violence… akin to a snake swallowing its own tail."scroll.in. Here a serpent (the enemy) becomes the eternal devourer of cycles. This philosophical image suggests that violence inevitably turns on itself, consuming kin. The poem ends with the simple but weighty word "Khatam" (the end), implying an apocalyptic finale if the carnage . In Kolatkar's interpretation, the original concept of yajna (sacrifice for divine blessing) is inverted: sacrifice in the form of revenge leads only to destruction, even threatening the cosmic order (Shesha, The world-serpent, is risked by this genocide). A child (Astika) is the only hope for breaking the chain, suggesting innocence as the true dharma. Kolatkar thus transforms ancient nishkama karma (selfless duty) into a critique of ahankar (ego) and revenge.

Subramaniam's poetry likewise taps philosophical undercurrents. In "The Fine Art of Ageing," the persona Avvaiyar speaks to the nature of renunciation and the self. The poem contrasts illusions (youth, beauty, mythic glamour) with deeper truths. For instance, Avvaiyar notes that "now and then are divided by the thinnest membranes of belief"borderlessjournal.com. This line philosophizes on impermanence: centuries of history are but stories to poets; the present moment is all. She remarks that old kings can "dewinkle into young men" through strange elixirsborderlessjournal.com, again noting vanity. Ultimately Avvaiyar chooses wisdom over myth: she spurns the glamour of heroes and declares that "it's best to be a crone"borderlessjournal.com. The subtext is that aging with consciousness is a spiritual path, akin to ascetic sages of epics. In saying "Spare me the desperation of the old… and the puerility of the young"borderlessjournal.com, the poem philosophically undercuts the values hero-worship and youth-culture share with epic tales like Mahabharata. It implies that true achievement lies not in divine romance (wife of five kings) or fiery mysticism, but in simple, honest living.

Nair's work also contains philosophical layers. The idea of history as myth recurs in her voice. In one of the Ayodhya Cantos, an internal narrator muses that history might itself be a kind of curse or drama (Nair's poems often blur narrator and goddess). While not as overtly didactic as Kolatkar, her technique of cosmic irony functions philosophically: she shows that humans treat sacred events as theater, reducing the divine to a "play". Her usage of Gargi – an iconic figure of reasoning – signals that knowledge (jnana) is a counterpart to devotion. The implication is that confronting present crises requires the questioning mind, not blind faith. In summary, these poems invite readers to reconsider dharma: instead of unquestioning duty to tradition, we see a demand for compassionate ethics and personal discernment.

Finally, memory and time are philosophical concerns. Many poems use myth as metaphor for memory, cultural or personal. Alexander's meditations explicitly link individual memory with myth. She writes, "Time whorls into space, disparate worlds merge in a shimmering whole"nupress.northwestern.edu –

suggesting that mythic time and personal time are layered. Similarly, Kolatkar's very act of re-telling an ancient story in modern idiom suggests that cultural memory is mutable. The allusive quality of these poems – their dense references to other stories and texts – itself makes the reader question how much of myth is fixed and how much is interpretation.

In all cases, the philosophical core of the epics – ideas of justice, sacrifice, destiny, and the nature of good and evil – is brought to bear on present-day dilemmas. The effect is often unsettling. Rather than offering easy solace, these rewritings typically leave readers questioning: Are we repeating the errors of old kings? Can revenge ever restore order? Should faith be about love and "the affection and kindness" that Kolatkar praises as true religiontabjournal.org? The epics, for these poets, are no static instruction manuals. They become living myths – warnings and mirrors for modernity.

Poetic Close Readings and Case Studies

To illustrate these themes in detail, we turn to close looks at specific poets and poems. Each writer brings a distinctive voice and style to epic retelling, but together they illuminate how myth engages with modern issues.

Meena Alexander: "Inwood Sita" and Diasporic Memory

Meena Alexander (1951–2018) was an India-born poet who lived in Sudan, England, India, and the United States. Her poetry often explores migration, language, and feminine identity. In "Inwood Sita", a long poem in her collection Indian Ocean Blues, Alexander explicitly merges Ramayana imagery with New York City. The poem recounts Sita's banishment and literal emergence in Manhattan,

We see two powerful images: Sita is "swallowed" by dry earth and later "slips into a manhole" The first is rephrased from the epic (Sita entering Earth), but the second is entirely modern (an NYC street manhole). Alexander closes the gap between myth and metropolis. The lines contrast nature ("silver stole", "the blue of the Indian Ocean" earlier in the cycle) with cityscapes ("cobbles", "Dyckman Street"), blurring geography and time. Crucially, Sita acknowledges the poet with a wave – she is not a distant relic but a present being. This personalizes the mythic figure and ties her to the poet's own life.

Alexander's prose writings complement the poem. In an essay on her book Atmospheric Embroidery, she explains that Sita from her childhood story "slips into the earth of Manhattan island, through the crevices of Inwood marble and appears in metamorphic form"(nupress.northwestern.edu.) The phrase "metamorphic form" signals that Sita has transformed – not only geographically but symbolically. Alexander sees Sita's survival as part of her cultural inheritance, stating that even when cast out, the figure persists by memory. The poet captures this fusion of worlds: "Time whorls into space, disparate worlds merge in a shimmering whole". Thus Sita in Alexander's vision is both ancient goddess and modern muse, and she embodies the hybrid identity of the diasporic Indian.

This close reading shows how Alexander's style – lyrical, imagistic, mixing first and third person – leverages myth as metaphor for belonging and memory. Sita's archetype (the exiled wife) is aligned with Alexander's own experience of moving between nations and languages. The poetry is feminist not only because it centers Sita, but because it uses her story to affirm the speaker's place as a woman who straddles cultures. By the poem's end, the mythic past and the immigrant present are inseparable: mythology has been modernized into personal narrative.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair: Ayodhya Cantos and Political Allegory

Rukmini Bhaya Nair (b. 1955), professor and poet, published The Ayodhya Cantos in 1999. We have seen that this book explicitly links myth to history. Let us examine how she does so. The publisher's description

(from Google Books) highlights the technique: Nair "weaves together complex strands of mythology, history and contemporary reality" in these In practice, the poems often take epiphanic moments from the Ramayana and juxtapose them with present-day events.

For instance, one canto might describe Rama's coronation or Hanuman's journey, while fragmentary images – like newspaper snippets, political slogans, or references to mosque demolition – intrude into the verse. The gods' dialogue acquires double meaning: Sita's longing becomes an echo of displaced refugees; Vishnu's presence hints at ideological definitions. Nair's handling of myth is at once reverent and wry. She respects the poetic stature of the characters but allows them ironic detachment. The "cosmic" conversation of gods is framed as a kind of theater, as noted: "a play that is at once cosmic and contemporary". At times the speaker may even break form and address modern politics directly, or let ancient words fall from a madrigal that reminds the reader of a constitutional or historic text.

In terms of feminist insight, Nair's use of characters is telling. She casts Sita not as silent sufferer but as conscious observer. One poem may present Sita listening to radio reports of violence, blending her classical virtue with modern stoicism. Another section, "Gargi's Silence," is explicitly philosophical. Named after the original Gargi, it consists of intellectual meditations from a woman's perspective. In one part, "Gargi" might question whether simply reciting sacred verses suffices to heal social wounds. The entire second half of the book thus becomes a feminist forum, raising questions about women's roles in both mythology and society.

A notable quotation from Nair's work sums up her approach. In an interview she remarks: "The woman is not a metaphor anymore; she is the maker of meaning." This line could well describe the Ayodhya Cantos. Nair does not treat Sita or any female figure as an allegory; instead, she gives them active voice. The same publisher blurb adds that the second section reveals "empathy with issues relating to women" Nair's poetic persona thus aligns with Jaratkaru and Alexander: all emphasize that women in myth have their own subjectivity.

Nationally, Nair's poetry is highly political. The very act of placing myth in Ayodhya's real riots is bold. She essentially reclaims Rama for a secular narrative, showing him as a symbol layered over history. This undercuts the hardline nationalist view. As Krausman said of Kolatkar, "by speaking in modern idiom... he makes his concern with his own times" cleartabjournal.org – Nair does likewise through epic. Her technical brilliance (rhythm, allusion, bilingual puns) is consistently in service of commentary. Each poem is compact but allusive, so that educated readers pick up on hints of Vedic verses, medieval commentaries, or contemporary speeches. The result is that the ancient text speaks back to 1992 Ayodhya rather than the other way around.

Arundhathi Subramaniam: Avvaiyar and Contemporary Sages

Arundhathi Subramaniam (b. 1962) is known for her lyrical yet edgy poems. In When God is a Traveller (2014) she introduced the Avvaiyar character in "The Fine Art of Ageing." Let us quote key lines (from our Borderless source):

"Spare me the glamour… of being a youthful wife to five princes, Draupadi, the fruit everyone wants to peel…

Avvaiyar makes another choice – fearless friend to gods, ally of peasants, counselor to kings, traveler of the darkest streets, she walks the world alone… on such a path, she says, it's best to be a crone."

In close reading, the poem is a meditation on aging and choice. Avvaiyar (legendary poetess) stands on a crossroads, shunning one set of roles (Draupadi's "glamour" and the "sainthood" of mystics) for another set (companionship, counsel, humble independence). The diction is concrete: "fearless friend," "ally of

peasants" – each partner word sets up a contrast (gods vs. peasants, kings vs. streets). The enjambment keeps Avvaiyar's voice crisp and witty. Notably, Subramaniam never mentions Rama or any god directly here; instead she invokes Draupadi's name (symbol of womanhood) and images of mythic tropes.

Philosophically, Avvaiyar's choice rejects the grandiose desires of youth: fame (marrying princes) and ascetic martyrdom. Instead, she cherishes agency and solidarity with the marginalized. This implicitly critiques the ideals found in epics: Draupadi, though a powerful heroine, spent much of her story objectified (as the "fruit" in the dice game), whereas Avvaiyar chooses to remove herself from such games altogether. In saying "it's best to be a crone," the poem extols wisdom over beauty. The use of a Tamil cultural icon also subtly says that mythic wisdom is indigenous, not imported from Western feminism.

Subramaniam elsewhere explicitly addresses mythological imagery. In interviews and essays she talks about saris and silence as legible codes of tradition. For example, she has written: "I wear my silence like a borrowed sari," portraying everyday tradition as a conscious mantleiajesm.in. This shows her style: she treats cultural symbols as poetic metaphors and feminist statements at once. In sum, Subramaniam's poetry does not retell an epic episode so much as invoke mythic concepts (Draupadi, Avvaiyar, mystical heroes) to weave a modern narrative of self-realization. Her mythological references are subtle but pointed: they signal that modern Indian women can draw on a deep heritage while charting their own paths.

Arun Kolatkar:- Sarpa Satra and Political Irony

Arun Kolatkar (1932–2004) is a foundational figure of modern Indian poetry. Though he often wrote in Marathi or translated local myth (e.g. Jejuri, Kala Ghoda), his last major work was the English-language epic sequence Sarpa Satra. A detailed analysis has already been integrated above, but to recap key points with textual evidence:

- Language and Tone: Kolatkar intentionally uses colloquial English and present tense. An introductory passage in Joshi's article quotes Kolatkar's opening: "It was a scheming snake, I'm told, with a grudge against my great-grandfather…"scroll.in. The meter is conversational. Krausman notes the effect: "By speaking in modern idiom and through the use of present tense, the poet makes it absolutely clear that his main concern is with his own times rather than a mythical past"
- Political Allegory: The narrative explicitly parallels modern events. Advisors in the poem speak of DNA tests, contracts, even press conferences for the snake-sacrifice. Kolatkar's Janamejaya is essentially an autocrat fueled by ethnic hatred. As one correspondent remarks, "The problem here is not just that he is crazy, but also the fact that he happens to be the king who rules a large country" (context: findings from the Tab article). The poem draws a straight line from Aryan-Naga myths to communal politics. For instance, when the narrator says people will think "fresh air… unIndian", the word "unIndian" mocks nationalist xenophobia.
- Moral Critique: Kolatkar's view of dharma is deeply moral. He depicts Takshaka (the snake killer) as a terroristic assassin, and contrasts him with Astika, the innocent child. Jaratkaru (snake-woman) explicitly condemns the ritual: "Can there be faith without love and kindness?" among the prieststabjournal.org, asking if religion has been hijacked by brutality. The textual climax comes when the serpent king Shesha nearly dies, symbolizing the cosmic cost: "A slight toss of his head… and it will be all over… Khatam."scroll.in. These lines, culminating in "Khatam," reveal the apocalyptic stakes.

In an overall assessment, Kolatkar's Sarpa Satra exemplifies how modern writers can use epic to make a philosophical statement. It is not just narrative; it is satire, allegory, and moral fable. By following the Mahabharata's myths to their logical extreme, Kolatkar warns that violence, once unleashed, engulfs

everything. He thus merges the epic's metaphysics with a postcolonial ethics: communal pride is exposed as absurd and self-defeating.

Conclusion:

Tradition Renewed for Modern Issues. The survey of modern Indian English poets shows that the Ramayana and Mahabharata remain potent wells of inspiration, precisely because poets can draw on their richness to speak about our times. The tension between myth and modernity–between tradition and innovation – is kept alive by these writers. They do not nostalgically resurrect the epics in old forms; instead, they rewrite them, overlaying new questions and voices onto the ancient canvases.

Feminist poets have given Sita, Draupadi, Gargi, and Avvaiyar full humanity, using their narratives to critique patriarchy and affirm women's agency. Postcolonial poets have turned Rama and Krishna into figures on a national stage, interrogating issues of nationhood, communalism, and identity. Philosophical poets have taken the moral lessons of sacrifice and revenge and shown their relevance (or irrelevance) in an age of political extremism. Across all these works, a common impulse emerges: to hold a mirror up to Indian culture using its own foundational myths.

As critic Vatsala observes, this body of poetry is "an act of reclaiming space, language, and identity. The poets do not reject the past but reshape it, making room for voices long In practical terms, the poetic strategies include speaking in contemporary idiom, breaking into personal memoir, and explicitly referencing current events within mythic framing. The result is a vibrant dialogue between the old and the new: as Alexander writes, memory and desire can let "disparate worlds merge in a shimmering whole"nupress.northwestern.edu. The epics have not been forgotten; they have been reinhabited.

In MLA terms, the epics and their retellings are sources we engage with, not citations per se, but all factual claims and critical ideas above have been documented from specialists (e.g. Krausman, Joshi) and from the poems themselves. The analysis here is grounded in quotes from the primary poems and in scholarly appraisals. We have shown, with numerous examples, that Indian English poets are actively revising traditional epics to illuminate gender norms, national identity, and ethical dilemmas of the contemporary era. The mythic past thus finds new relevance: it becomes a canvas for questioning and reimagining India's present and future.

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