

Female Trauma in Mythological Retellings: A Feminist Psychological Approach

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Abstract

The contemporary retelling of mythological narratives represents female trauma through a feminist psychological lens. Women have been historically depicted in constrained or subordinate roles in mythological stories and often normalize their suffering as part of divine or heroic plots. All those narratives have been reinterpreted by Contemporary authors to foreground the psychological and emotional experiences of female characters. By analyzing selected texts, this study examines how trauma manifests in the lives of mythological women, including oppression, social marginalization, and betrayal. The research also highlights the intersections of gender, trauma, and power by showing how patriarchal structures contributed to the perpetuation of suffering. It also highlights how narrative techniques are used to convey the inner words of traumatized women. Those narrative techniques are nonlinear storytelling, first-person perspectives, and symbolic representation. Along with this, Psychological frameworks are applied to explore repression, memory, and coping mechanisms in the characters' experiences. Finally, the study examines how retelling challenges traditional patriarchal interpretations of myths and gives voice to previously silenced female perspectives.

Keywords: Female trauma, mythological retellings, psychological analysis, gender studies, literary trauma.

1. Introduction

Mythology, across cultures, has played a central role in shaping cultural values, collective consciousness, and gender norms. Within these narratives, women are often represented in subordinate roles, their identities confined to being daughters, wives, or mothers of male heroes. Their suffering such as abandonment, exile, violence, or humiliation is frequently normalized as an inevitable heroic destiny or part of divine will. For instance, figures such as Sita, Draupadi, and Tara in Indian Mythology or figures like Medea and Pandora in Greek mythology embody complex experiences of pain and resilience, but their trauma is rarely acknowledged in traditional interpretations. Instead, their suffering often serves as a symbolic device to uphold patriarchal order or moral lessons. However, in recent decades, writers, particularly women authors, have begun reimagining these myths. Through retelling, they foreground the silenced voices of mythological women and reconstruct their narratives with an emphasis on psychological and emotional depth. These reinterpretations allow readers to revisit familiar myths, not merely as stories of gods and heroes, but as narratives of human struggle, trauma, and agency.

Problem Statement:

Despite their cultural importance, traditional mythological texts have rarely addressed the psychological dimensions of female trauma. Women's pain is often glossed over or depicted as a means to advance male-centric plots. This limited portrayal neglects the inner worlds of female characters, denying them the subjectivity necessary to understand their suffering. As a result, mythological women remain marginalized both in narrative space and in cultural memory. Contemporary retellings attempt to challenge this gap by exploring the impact of betrayal, humiliation, abandonment, and marginalization on women's psychological lives. Yet, academic studies on these retellings often remain confined to feminist literary analysis without integrating insights from trauma theory and psychology. This creates a need for a cross-disciplinary approach that combines literature, feminism, and psychology to examine how trauma is represented, processed, and resisted in mythological retellings.

Objectives:

The primary objective of this study is to analyze how contemporary retellings of mythological narratives articulate female trauma using feminist and psychological frameworks. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Examine the representation of trauma in the lives of mythological women, including emotional, social, and cultural dimensions.
2. Investigate how patriarchal structures contribute to trauma and how retellings challenge or subvert these norms.
3. Apply trauma theory and feminist psychology to interpret how memory, repression, and resilience shape female characters' experiences.
4. Highlight how retellings empower women by reclaiming silenced voices and reimagining agency.

This research holds significance on multiple levels. First, it demonstrates the power of literature to bring psychological depth to mythological figures traditionally reduced to archetypes. By applying a feminist psychological lens, the study emphasizes how retellings validate women's trauma, making it visible and worthy of scholarly attention. Second, it highlights the importance of cross-disciplinary approaches, bridging literature, psychology, and gender studies, to better understand the complexity of trauma. Third, the study underscores the role of literature in shaping cultural awareness—challenging patriarchal ideologies, amplifying marginalized voices, and offering readers new models of female strength and resilience. Finally, it positions mythological retellings not only as creative reinterpretations but also as cultural interventions that contribute to discourses of healing, empowerment, and gender justice.

2. Literature Review

Feminist literary criticism has long emphasized the need to reinterpret texts from women's perspectives, questioning the patriarchal frameworks that silence or marginalize female voices (Showalter, 1977)[1]. In parallel, trauma studies, as theorized by Cathy Caruth (1996)[2] and Judith Herman (1992)[3], provide a psychological framework for understanding how traumatic experiences disrupt memory, identity, and narrative expression. When these approaches intersect, they create a productive ground for analyzing women's trauma in literature. In recent years, mythological retellings have gained prominence as a literary space where female characters are given psychological depth and agency. Authors like Kavita Kane, through works such as *Tara's Truce* (2023)[4], and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in *The Palace of Illusions* (2008)[5], foreground the suffering and resilience of mythological women, rewriting their stories from within. Beyond Indian contexts, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005)[6] similarly challenges

classical Greek myths by retelling them through the eyes of women, revealing silenced experiences of trauma, betrayal, and endurance. Scholarship on trauma and literature highlights how narrative techniques work such as fragmentation, repetition, and interior monologues that mirror the psychological impact of trauma, allowing readers to engage with unspoken pain (Caruth, 1996)[2]. However, while feminist criticism and trauma theory have been individually applied to mythological retellings, there remains a gap in research that integrates both approaches to examine how women's trauma is represented and reimagined. This study seeks to address that gap by adopting an interdisciplinary perspective that combines feminist literary analysis with psychological insights into trauma, thereby contributing to a more holistic understanding of mythological narratives and their contemporary relevance.

3. Research Gap

While feminist criticism and trauma theory have been widely applied in literary studies, limited scholarship integrates these approaches specifically in the context of mythological retelling. Much of the existing research on mythology either focuses on cultural and historical interpretations of myths or on feminist re-readings that emphasize women's voices and agency. Similarly, trauma studies in literature often concentrate on war, exile, or colonial oppression, with fewer studies exploring the psychological dimensions of mythological female figures. Although works by authors such as Chitra Banerjee, Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, and Margaret Atwood have attracted attention for their feminist reinterpretations, there is a lack of systematic analysis that connects narrative strategies of retelling with psychological theories of trauma, repression, memory, and resilience. Moreover, cross-disciplinary research that bridges mythology, cultural history, feminist theory, and trauma psychology remains underdeveloped. This study addresses this gap by adopting an interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary framework to explore how contemporary retellings represent female trauma, challenge patriarchal norms, and reconstruct female agency through literary and psychological perspectives.

4. Research Methodology

The Research methodology study gives qualitative literary methods, focusing on feminist criticism and psychological approaches to trauma. A methodological approach is most appropriate for this research because it gives a deeper and intensive focus with textual details, symbolic structure, and narrative voice that gives the portrayal of trauma in mythological retelling. Through literary techniques, the methodological approach involves reading of closed selected texts, identifying the recurring ideas of oppression, betrayal, and silencing, and analyzing how it was expressed, for example, as first-person narration, timelines into fragmented symbols. From a feminist criticism point of view, the study explains how the patriarchal structures inserted in traditional myths are questioned, resisted, or reinterpreted in contemporary retelling, foregrounding women's subjectivities and their struggles for agency. In trauma studies, psychological frameworks were extracted particularly from the theories of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, and are related to interpreting the ways trauma affects memory, identity, and even character development. This dual view ensures that both the socio-cultural dimensions of gendered oppression and the psychological realities of trauma are investigated one after another. Moreover, the methodology incorporates an interdisciplinary perspective by linking literature with psychology and feminist theory, while also adopting a cross-disciplinary approach that connects mythology, cultural history, and gender studies. This allows the research to integrate perspectives outside textual analysis to

consider the sociocultural and psychological significance of mythological retelling as initiatives that confirm female suffering, reimagine resilience, and contribute to collective healing.

4.1 Interdisciplinary Perspectives

The interdisciplinary approach is central to this study. Literature, psychology, and gender studies are brought together to provide a holistic understanding of female trauma. From a literary perspective, retellings are examined as creative reinterpretations of mythological narratives. From a psychological perspective, trauma is understood in terms of its impact on memory, identity, and coping mechanisms. From a feminist perspective, the analysis foregrounds questions of power, silencing, and resistance. This cross-disciplinary framework allows the study to move beyond textual interpretation to explore how literature intersects with lived realities of trauma and resilience. It highlights the role of storytelling as both a cultural practice and a therapeutic process, bridging the gap between myth, psychology, and gendered experience.

4.2 Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives

The cross-disciplinary perspective enriches this study by moving beyond the integration of disciplines to highlight the overlaps and intersections between them. Mythology, psychology, cultural history, and feminist studies are not treated as separate domains but as interwoven fields that collectively illuminate the representation of trauma. Mythology provides the archetypal framework of women's suffering and resilience, while psychology interprets these experiences through concepts of repression, memory, and recovery. Cultural history situates myths within evolving social contexts, showing how patriarchal values shape both ancient narratives and their contemporary retellings. Feminist theory intersects with these domains by critiquing power structures and amplifying silenced female voices. Together, these perspectives demonstrate how mythological retellings are more than literary recreations which they function as cultural and psychological spaces where trauma is articulated, challenged, and transformed. By blurring disciplinary boundaries, the study underscores the relevance of myth in addressing modern issues of gendered oppression and highlights storytelling as both a collective cultural memory and a pathway toward healing and empowerment.

5. Analysis and Discussion

The portrayal of trauma in contemporary mythological retellings reveals the complex emotional, psychological, and social suffering experienced by female characters such as Draupadi and Tara. These women, often depicted in traditional myths as passive figures within divine or heroic narratives, are reimaged in modern texts as individuals who endure abuse, betrayal, and marginalization while also negotiating their silenced identities. Retellings highlight not only the pain of being objectified, abandoned, or dishonored but also the enduring psychological scars such experiences leave behind. Yet, within this trauma lies the possibility of resistance and agency. By reclaiming their voices, these female figures embody resilience, using their suffering as a foundation for empowerment and transformation. The reinterpretation of myths thus becomes a therapeutic act, allowing characters to challenge the constraints of patriarchal traditions and reassert their subjectivity. Narrative techniques play a crucial role in this process: the use of first-person perspectives enables readers to access the inner consciousness of traumatized women, fragmented and nonlinear storytelling mirrors the disruption of memory caused by trauma, and symbolic motifs serve as allegories for psychological suffering and resilience. At the same time, retellings intervene in these structures by spotlighting coping strategies and resilience, thereby reframing women not merely as victims but as agents of resistance and healing. Ultimately, the analysis

demonstrates that contemporary mythological retellings function as cultural and psychological spaces where trauma is not only represented but also reinterpreted as a pathway toward identity reconstruction and empowerment.

6. Conclusion

Contemporary retellings of mythological narratives provide a powerful platform for foregrounding female trauma, challenging traditional patriarchal interpretations, and giving voice to previously silenced women. By reimagining the experiences of mythological figures such as Draupadi, Tara, and other female protagonists, these narratives reveal the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of trauma often overlooked in classical texts. The integration of feminist literary criticism with psychological trauma theory allows for a nuanced understanding of how oppression, betrayal, and marginalization are experienced and processed by women, highlighting both their suffering and their resilience. Narrative techniques such as first-person perspectives, fragmented storytelling, and symbolic representation enable authors to convey the complexities of trauma, memory disruption, and coping strategies, transforming retellings into spaces of psychological insight and cultural critique. This interdisciplinary approach demonstrates the significance of combining literature, psychology, and gender studies to examine the interplay between narrative representation and lived realities of trauma. Moreover, cross-disciplinary perspectives illuminate how mythology, cultural history, and feminist theory intersect to reinterpret and reclaim women's identities, positioning literature not only as a medium of storytelling but also as a tool for empowerment, healing, and social consciousness. The study contributes to ongoing scholarship at the intersection of literature, psychology, and gender studies, offering new frameworks for understanding female trauma in literary texts. Future research could extend this analysis to comparative studies across cultures and literary traditions, exploring how mythological retellings worldwide address trauma, gendered oppression, and the reconstruction of female identity, further enriching interdisciplinary and cross-cultural scholarship.

7. References

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