

# **Myth and Womanhood: Rewriting Indian Feminism through Retellings**

**Ishika Singh**

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Humanities and Linguistics  
Sarla Birla University, Ranchi, India

**Abstract:** *This paper, Myth & Womanhood: Rewriting Indian Feminism through Retellings, explores the evolution of Indian feminism through the lens of mythology, as re-imagined by contemporary writers. It examines how shifting societal perspectives have reshaped the portrayal of mythological female figures, offering a deeper understanding of gender complexities. Mythological retellings serve as a powerful medium for challenging traditional gender roles, particularly through the stories of Draupadi, Gandhari, and Kunti from the Mahabharata, as well as Ahilya and Sita from the Ramayana. These narratives provide critical insight into the layered experiences of women, both within ancient texts and their modern reinterpretations. This paper argues that Indian feminism extends beyond the conventional fight for equality—it is an intricate interplay of regional, religious, and cultural identities. With the creative liberty afforded by contemporary literature, mythological retellings have surfaced that not only redefine these iconic women but also reflect the changing dynamics of gender discourse. By reimagining these characters with agency and depth, modern feminist writers challenge both contemporary societal constructs and the historical misrepresentation of women's roles in traditional Indian society. Through this, mythology becomes more than just a relic of the past—it transforms into a foundation for progressive feminist thought.*

**Keywords:** Indian feminism, Mythology, Mythological texts, Modern Retellings, Feminism, Feminist Literature

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

"Mythology has been told mostly from the male point of view, but when you look at it from a woman's perspective, the stories change. They become more nuanced, more complex, more interesting."

*Chitra Divakaruni Banarjee*

Feminism at its core deals with how females have always been treated as a marginalized gender with subordinate treatment since the beginning of time and seeks to create a more equitable society by fighting for gender justice. It works towards dismantling the system of inequality and oppression against women and promotes equal rights, opportunities and respect for individuals. What started with a simple cry for help to solve women's oppression has now evolved into something that addresses a much wider range of issues all faced by women in the modern era as well, issues including reproductive rights, workplace equality and more. Today, feminism continues to evolve, encompassing diverse perspectives on how gender inequality intersects with race, class, sexuality, disability, and other aspects of identity. Even after years and years of fighting for rights and just the basic freedom of living, women still continue to be treated as the other part of the society, the weaker and incapable part who are living with permission from the strong ones.

Indian feminism addresses the fight against the oppression of women with respect to the social, cultural, religious and regional context of India. Indian mythology and history has always been the one to depict its women characters as obedient, simple, beautiful yet the ones who had to live under the influence of their male counterparts or guardians, they were well educated and equipped to take the decisions themselves and many of them have been shown as one of the most intelligent women as well but they were not allowed to use their brain and intelligence without the permission of their male guardians, thus has been a common narrative everywhere but at the same time, in Indian mythology women have always been a subject to immense respect and a motherly feeling was mostly shown for most of the female



characters, they are shown as very powerful beings, sometimes possessing supernatural powers as well. Modern day Indian feminism is more about gaining back that place of respect and power for women rather than fighting for the basic rights, with time and colonization, India lost its basic respect towards women but through our mythology, we can rediscover the place that women had in the society.

The modern Indian writers who focus on mythologies, retellings are trying to do the same by reimagining our major female characters like Sita and Draupadi in Chitra Divakaruni Banarjee's "Forest of Enchantments" and "The Palace of Illusions" respectively, Surpanakha in Kavita Kane's "Lanka's Princess" and female characters from Mahabharata like Ganga, Amba, Gandhari, Kunti, and Sharath Komarraju's "Queen of Hastinapur", Sita in Amish Tripathi's "SITA: The Warrior Princess". These writers have tried to bring about a change in the image of an ideal woman that we have in our minds idolizing these very female characters from our epics, they have tried to show these characters as strong, powerful, self made, vengeful and cunning as well, every emotions that used to drive men to take actions were focused in women and how the same emotions made them take some decisions. Were they same? Were they different? Were they even cruel? Were they harmful or helpful? Were they well thought enough? We will find the new kind of Indian feminism and the way in which the propaganda is being circulated while answering these questions. This paper mainly focuses on mentioning how the female point of view towards history can change the meaning of all the characters and incidents.

#### **MAIN THURST:**

There are many works and modern retelling of old Indian epics which now focus on just the female characters and what their point of view was when they were going through. The works mentioned in this paper are some of the best examples of the same. Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee is well known for her unique takes on female characters from our religious epics, she has an opinion which always differs from what is there in our scriptures. The Indian mythology has always depicted women as the softest of beings and yet given them the kind of importance that a male protagonist would have in an epic. Their presence is substantial and pivotal to the plot construction which again is one of the unique parts of Indian mythology, it doesn't just use the women characters for fun or for the fact that they might attract readers to read that story, they have a face, a name and a unique character. Indian mythology is very respectful towards its women characters, the male protagonists of our mythological epics and beliefs swear by the words of their mothers, wives, sisters and daughters but these women characters don't have a say in their fate, most of the times, their fates are governed by the decisions of their male counterparts, there is a lot of trust, love and respect towards them but what lacks is the ability to decide for one self. Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee takes up this part of the female psyche from the ancient scriptures and tries to mould them in a way which gives life to these characters, a life which has a voice and a say in how their life will turn out and how will they live and die. There are other authors as well who have tried to express their take on the female characters of the Indian mythology like Amish Tripathi in his Ramayana trilogy includes a book on the character of "Sita" and mentions the subtitles as "The Warrior Princess". We know Sita as the timid, kind and shy person with a strong will power who didn't let her kidnapper, Ravana touch her against her will. In Amish's novel, on the other hand she was a fierce warrior, who fought killing many of Ravana's men till the point she had to be brutally injured, sedated and taken away. Many such examples are there which changes our knowledge and point of view towards the Indian mythology completely giving us brand new glasses to look at it and 'think'.

Banerjee in her "Palace of Illusions" and Sharath Kommaraju's "Queens of Hastinapur" discusses, illustrates and highlights the life of women of Mahabharata, which being a huge epic with innumerable stories offers many female characters that can be narrated in a different way, a more modern way, their feelings and their point of views discussed more broadly than just being a mother, wife, sister or someone related to the male protagonist, but an individual who has the emotional and mental capability that exceeds any other gender mentioned in the epic. There are many characters from the beginning to the end of this epic that have been discussed originally in different lights, ranging from being a good mother who can sacrifice herself and her happiness for the betterment of her kids to a mother who sacrifices her own children to fulfill the divine purpose as prophesied by a male deity. Characters like "Kunti" have been shown as the epitome of sacrifice as she had to sacrifice her first child born because of a hymn to safeguard her reputation as chaste bachelorette then she had to sacrifice the love of her husband just so that he can be happy when he



remarried, then she had to leave the palace and her position as the 'queen of Hastinapur' because the husband was cursed, after the husband and then second wife passed away, she was left alone to fend for her five kids, two of them were from the second wife. Kunti had to single handedly make sure that the kids are getting back the much deserved status in the palace of Hastinapur when they returned, which again was a war in itself because the kids were not welcomed in the palace. Other major female character from the same epic is the character of "Gandhari" who gave up her ability to see because her husband was a person whom could not see, she did that so that the husband doesn't feel inferior or would not doubt her to be an unfaithful wife, she was known to be a girl who was extremely afraid of the dark was considered to be phenomenal in the epic, while in reality she was made to do it because the male character should not feel inferior than his female counterpart. The other character that holds significance is the character of "Draupadi", there have been multiple retellings of Draupadi's story, all of them showing her as the brave queen who was harassed by her own family members. The fact that at one point in time people believed that whatever happened to Draupadi was a result of her own doing reflects the thinking of society where if a girl is harassed, the blame falls on her for provoking the people. Draupadi was the first victim of the this mindset, it is believed that when she laughed in Duryodhana for falling in the illusion created in her palace, she invited him to snatch away all the things from all her husbands and forcefully try to take off her clothes in a court filled with all her family members including her husbands. The point when her husbands thought that she was their property and lost her in a gamble shows how little they respected her, her value was same as any non living thing which has no feelings, no opinions and no self respect. Draupadi being one of the most desired bachelorette of her time asked from a boon from the deity that she wants five qualities in her husband to which god replied she can't get all that in one man and eventually in a turn of events she was forced to marry five brothers all at once. She is still through some people minds deemed to be one of the most characterless women of Hindu mythology when in reality things were extremely difficult and different for her. There are many other characters in this epic whose life is shown in a different way but if we try to use stream of consciousness while writing or reading these epics, we will understand how these women felt and how they were treated, the crown of sacrifice that was supposed to be worn by women was just a heavy weight laden with barbed wire that they had to wear and bleed through all her life.

The other major epic of Hindu mythology is "Ramayana", where the main character is "Sita", the wife of Rama and the woman who was shown as so timid, so obedient; she left the lavish life of the place to accompany her husband when he was banished to the forest for 14 years were she was kidnapped and taken away by Ravana because Rama and his brother Lakshmana insulted Ravana's sister Surpanakha. Sita became a pawn in the game of revenge and she had to go through numerous allegations from her own countrymen after she returned, people doubted her purity and above all her husband Rama for whom she left everything good in her life banished her to the forest while she was pregnant. Throughout the story, Sita is shown as a helpless woman who had to suffer throughout because she was not capable of saving or standing up for herself. Other character that was cursed because men used her was "Ahilya" who was tricked by Lord Indra into believing that he was her husband and sleep with him when her husband went for his morning bath, when the Rishi returned he saw what happened and cursed Ahilya to turn into a stone until Lord Vishnu himself comes and touches her, she remained like that for years and years until Lord Rama was born and went into forest by chance to touch the stone and free her from the curse. A woman was gullible and tricked by someone with immense power and cunning intelligence was cursed by her husband and had to wait for centuries to be touched by God even if it was not her fault. Surpanakha was another such character, though widely known to be the vamp and the main reason why Ramayana happened, there are some people who believe in the fact that she was not always the cunning lady that she happened to be, she was an innocent princess loved by her brothers until Ravana decided to kill her husband and child because he didn't like them. Whatever Surpanakha did was just to fulfill that Revenge and at the end she won as Ravana was killed. Ravana's wife, Mandodari is the best example of how a woman suffers in the man's world, her whole family was destroyed just because her husband didn't care enough to listen to her advice, if only Ravana listened to her advice her husband and children would be alive and happy as they were, she warned Ravana to let go of Sita incessantly but Ravana in his pride never paid her any heed.



## II. CONCLUSION

Indian feminism is a movement deeply rooted in the country's social, cultural, and historical contexts. Through the lens of mythology, modern feminist authors seek to reclaim the narratives of female characters that were once relegated to subordinate roles. By reimagining figures like Sita, Draupadi, and Gandhari, writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Amish Tripathi challenge traditional portrayals and highlight the strength, intelligence, and resilience of these women. This evolving feminist discourse is not just about reclaiming lost voices but also about reshaping societal perceptions of gender. Indian feminism, thus, continues to evolve, striving for empowerment, equality, and justice.

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