

Original Article

Myth and Modernity: Revisiting Epic Narratives in Twenty-First Century Literature: A Broad View

MEENA MAHADEVAN

Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English, AIMAN College of Arts and Science for Women, Trichirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT: Mythological stories are the ancient foundations of cultures, which provide a cohesive narrative regarding collective memory, morals and behavior within civilisations. Epic stories have experienced a renaissance in the twenty-first century with new adaptations that connect ancient folklore and modern preoccupations. This essay discusses the changing dynamics between myth and modernity through a close reading of contemporary literature that reinterprets classical epics of the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Iliad, and Odyssey. The article examines selected works by Chitra Banerjee, Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, Amish Tripathi's *The Shiva Trilogy* and *Ram Chandra Series*, Anand Neelakantan's *Asura* and *Ajaya* series to see how retellings help contemporise characters, plots, and ideas from epics in order to comment on present-day concerns such as equality of genders, identity formation, social justice, seeking political power over sport science and history. This paper illustrates that mythological retellings are not merely adaptations of ancient stories but dynamic literary responses that unsettle prevailing narratives and raise the voices of hitherto silent subjects through a comparative and interdisciplinary analysis. These new interpretations indicate a resurgence of myth in the modern world, but growing pushes to reinterpret epic traditions within our changing culture. With a surprising depth of understanding and scholarship, the author argues that contemporary mythological fiction serves as both an oral tradition and a discursive approach to how we comprehend history. In reshaping epic narratives, this literature reminds us of the continued evolution of myth as a vehicle for cultural reflection, resistance and rejuvenation.

KEYWORDS: Mythology, Modern Literature, Epic Narratives, Retellings, Identity, Gender, Cultural Studies, Contemporary Fiction.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE DYNAMIC INTERSECTION OF MYTH AND MODERNITY

Modernity and myth have, de facto, always transformed each other; they are not mutually exclusive. Early twentieth-century secularization theories promised that the march of technological progress and scientific rationality would push ancient myths into the dustbin of history, but twenty-first-century writing shows just the reverse. As we enter a new age of relentless digitization, international displacement, hyper-connectivity and climate crisis, contemporaneous writers are working backwards in order to progress. Their search is not only venturing through comforts offered by foundational epic traditions the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Iliad and the Odyssey, not just to escape from anxieties of the present as much as to decrypt them. Rather than static, ancient narratives have a plastic quality, providing authors of today with a flexible structural and psychological foundation from which to engage modern disparate realities.

Twenty-first-century literature that revisits epic narratives does so through a lens of revisionist critique. The alternative, as modern authors have shown again and again in their retellings, is not to proudly recreate the grand, patriarchal, nationalistic structures that characterize most classic epics, but to tear them apart. It is a movement away from the macro perspective of the classical hero to the micro scale of the marginalized, this generic shift. Though many modern versions shift the center of narrative power into the hands of women, outsiders, and colonized peoples whose voices were silenced or overshadowed in their source texts. Thereby, most recent literature subverts the epic as a means of transcultural imperialism into an arena of revolutionary democratization by showing how both the psychological and the political mechanisms at play in antiquity reflect our own.

This necessary level of democratization surface has been exemplified quite remarkably in subcontinent literature, where ancient models are mobilised against contemporary social order. Perhaps the most iconic is that of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni with *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), which stunningly reimagines history, through a single lens this time, Panchaali(Draupadi). Divakaruni shines a stark light on the emotional and institutional toll of patriarchal systems by re-centering an epic originally driven by male political ambition, codes of honor, and dynastic warfare around a woman's inner life. Her thesis lays out an almost archaeological basis for how old notions of duty (dharma) can become weapons of tyranny, a problem that resonates with the contemporary debates over gender equity, personal rights and ethics in a postmodernising East.

Likewise, the mythological schema is used in twenty-first-century literature to explore the multitude of connections among historical trauma, postcolonial identity and state sovereignty. Amish Tripathi blurs the line of myth entirely through historical realism and speculative fiction in his *The Shiva Trilogy* (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 2010). It all follows that Tripathi does not let the deities of yore be supernaturally unerring; rather, he presents them as human beings making extraordinary choices leading to their becoming legends. This recontextualisation allows the fable to work as an allegory for contemporary anxieties and raises questions about governance, institutional corruption, the senselessness of caste divisions and morality in warfare. In this sort of structural subversion, the ancient epic becomes not a sacred, hermetically sealed history, but rather a commentary on collective identity crises inflicting many modern societies.

In the end, the resurgence of epic narratives in the twenty-first century confirms that myth is not anathema to modernity but its deepest language. Incorporating ancient archetypes into contemporary prose, writers tie the fragmented, transitory experiences of our digital-age humanity to universal truths that transcend time. Whether through even more rigorous chronological gaps, harnessing gender inequities, interrogating the ethics of institutional authority or practices of channelling of trauma as a mass process, modern retellings of epics offer an invaluable space for cultural reflection. *Myth and Modernity: Epic Narratives in Twenty-First Century Literature* is an attempt to look at those very points of intersection; how authors today are using what mythology the scaffolding (sometimes trappings) of antiquity affords them, offering a more inclusive, critical and complicated narrative on our contemporary time.

2. MYTH AS A LIVING NARRATIVE

Myths, probably one of the oldest forms of storytelling in human history after all, they are supposed to be are often seen as if they look from a great distance back in time. Myth, explain literary theorists, is not dead but alive and changing with evolving cultural contexts. In the case of mythology, these are symbolic systems by which societies make sense of complex realities.

Modern literature shows that myths are not just fixed texts, but a dynamic cultural repertoire. Modern writers reinvent myth, characters, and events to seek the fears, hopes, and wars of today. This is why epic narratives still appeal to writers even as technology and society evolve at a dizzying pace.

3. REIMAGINING EPIC HEROES AND VILLAINS

The first major trend in 21st-century literature is a re-examination of traditional heroes and villains. In the earlier iterations of epics, characters were oftentimes depicted in black and white terms of virtuousness and villainy. Retellings in a modern context reject such binary distinctions by engaging with psychological nuance and other perspectives.

As an illustration, modern-day depictions of the likes of Ravana, Karna, Draupadi and other characters from epic traditions introduce them as fully developed human beings whose deeds are a direct response to social and political conditions. Amish Tripathi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Anand Neelakantan are some authors who have shown their works on how marginalized characters or those misunderstood can be brought to the forefront of narratorial speak. These reimaginings challenge assumptions and reveal the intricacies of human experience.

4. CONTEMPORARY EPIC RETELLINGS - MYTH AND MODERNITY

The nexus between myth and modernity has become one of the major points of interest in present-day literary studies. Although considered sacred narratives experienced in ancient times, many modern authors have since returned to mythological stories as a medium for tackling present-day social, political and cultural issues. *Ever Long for Epics*; *The Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are some of the great epic texts (and inspirations) that authors keep returning to because they explore universal human themes centred on heroism, power and morality; identity and conflict; humanity and destiny. At the very start of the twenty-first century, these narratives have been reinvented through fresh retellings that reinterpret old cast and plot with a new eye on the past while forming ties to a new/old era.

Probably the most significant of these is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), which retells the *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Draupadi. Widely portrayed as a composite character, her voice was relegated to the background; Draupadi is here presented as the protagonist of her own tale. In this narrative shift, Divakaruni contests patriarchal readings of the epic while engaging themes of agency, identity, desire, and resistance among women. The novel demonstrates both how mythic retellings can restore neglected voices and also how they make space for alternative readings of canon.

Likewise, in *The Shiva Trilogy* (*The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, and *The Oath of the Vayuputras*) by Amish Tripathi, this divine figure, Shiva, is ultimately a humanistic leader whose deeds elevate him to mythic status. Tripathi takes a deity revered from ancient to contemporary times and makes the story accessible by presenting him as an individual stuffed with human dilemmas, political conflicts and social obligations. His subsequent *Ram Chandra Series* goes deeper into the *Ramayana* by laying out alternative perspectives, nudging readers to take a critical view of absolute truth and ethics.

Another example is Anand Neelakantan, who takes a more revisionist tack in works like *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* and the *Ajaya* series. What these novels do is blur the lines that separate hero from villain by narrating events from the viewpoint of Ravana and also the Kauravas. Where these characters would be traditionally represented as villains, they have instead been portrayed as multifaceted people affected by society at large, the violence of politics and their need for a better life. Through these different narratives, Neelakantan reveals the partiality of history and mythological storytelling while addressing issues of marginalization, power, and social inequality.

Also, the quest for the possession of a kingdom inside and outside of Man also draws from classical Western epics such as *Youssef*, where men are proven greater than Gods themselves. It can be seen that even contemporary literature is not free from this influence. Modern retellings often reframe characters from Homer to probe war, trauma, exile and issues of gender and identity. What these retellings show is that because epic tales engage with spaces and events well beyond their unique historicity, they are a way to communicate enduring aspects of the human experience. Contemporary authors use mythological paths, whether grounded in Indian traditions or Western ones, to tackle present-day issues while still retaining the symbolic depth of ancient stories.

The modern mythological fiction stands out by offering the dialogue of gender equality and identity formation. The female characters who have been active participants in the supporting roles are now increasingly shown as taking control of their own fates. Authors overturning traditional gender hierarchies with feminist reinterpretations opened up space for alternative perspectives. Meanwhile, individuals grapple with issues surrounding their personal and collective identities as they navigate conflict between duties and desires, tradition and selfhood.

How contemporary reimaginings also speak to larger issues of social justice and political power. Shifting the focus to marginalized voices and challenging hegemonic narratives, these texts push readers to question conventional moral paradigms surrounding heroism and authority. The myth and mythological stories expand into the arenas of caste, class exclusion, governance and resistance. In this way, the retellings become more than just adaptations for the sake of literature but also critical responses to contemporary culture.

Also, these stories show how myths are not only static historical relics but also living cultural resources. The authors take the tradition of epics and creatively rework them into texts of indelible vitality that may respond to an evolving social environment. It combines ancient mythology with modern sensibilities, thus engaging the readers with ageless wisdom while also confronting any challenges that they may face in the present time.

For this reason alone, the twenty-first-century revival of mythological retellings demonstrates how epic narratives have continued to speak to our cultural imagination. Exemplary works by Divakaruni, Tripathi, and Neelakantan show that myths are still potent vehicles for inquiry into identity, justice, power, and gendered outlooks on human experience. What their retellings reveal at best is that mythic tales are not just reproducing centuries-old scripts but instead reinterpreting, mimicking and conversing with them in ways that contest hegemonic ideologies, bring voices of the underrepresented to the forefront and open up new potentials for how today we understand both tradition and contemporary life.

5. GENDER AND FEMINIST REINTERPRETATIONS

The more recent retellings tend to put female perspectives, which were previously overshadowed in the OG epic tales, at the forefront. Feminist literary criticism has been instrumental in prompting writers to retell myths from women's perspectives.

Women in literature, like Sita, Draupadi, Penelope, Helen, et al., are no longer folk-dresses simply relegated to mere male-centred storylines as passive puppets with minds of their own and material agency of some sort. A prime example of this trend can be found in novels like *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, which imbue female protagonists with narrative authority.

These reinterpretations not only subvert patriarchal structures established in traditional narratives but also contribute to the discussion on gender equality and women's empowerment as a whole.

6. MYTH, IDENTITY, AND CULTURAL MEMORY

As the world has become increasingly multicultural and globalized, myths have worked as an essential means for people to renegotiate identity. Many contemporary writers use the epic form, a centuries-old paradigm for describing cultural belonging or association, e.g., migration, diasporas, national identity and first-person narratives, along with other 20th-century literary devices.

Through the use of mythological references, authors can link individual experiences to more universal narratives. In their new bullring, myths juggle the task of stopping stories from falling into obscurity while meeting us in the present.

The lingering success of mythological fiction persistently reminds us that epic narratives continue to have a pivotal role in defining individual and communal identities.

7. ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Recent work, however, has been more deeply centered around ecology. Environmental disasters like climate change, deforestation, and biodiversity loss have made writers turn to myths that emphasize this connection between humanity and nature.

These wrathful yet ethereal beings may appear in common landscapes, or they may be sacred forests, rivers, and other non-human entities recreated as symbols of ecological interrelatedness in contemporary retellings. These ideologies question anthropocentric conceptions of the world, as well as encourage environmental awareness.

Modern literature draws on mythological narratives to accentuate the relevance of ancient wisdom in contemporary contexts, where ecological themes can guide us towards resolving real-world environmental dilemmas.

8. POSTCOLONIAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS

Myth-related oral tradition is widely used in postcolonial literature to challenge existing power structures and cultural hegemony. It is where myth becomes a site of contention, suppressed histories, and alternate points of view can be voiced.

Modern adaptations challenge established historical accounts and examine colonialism, nationalism, caste, race, and social disparity. Authors write revisionist stories to interrogate power and history, meditating on institutional norms while providing ways to think about culture more inclusively.

By that logic, mythological retellings are not just literary texts but also political interventions.

9. THE INFLUENCE OF POPULAR CULTURE

The revival of myth in modern discourse is intimately connected with its rejuvenation in popular culture. With the proliferation of epic narratives in films, television series, graphic novels, and media (digital/text/streaming), audiences around the world are exposed to a global current. Increasingly, mythological stories are being adapted into formats which appeal to younger generations. These versions use the mythology that is adaptable to a new and changing landscape of technological usages and cultural traditions. The interplay of literature and mass culture goes a long way toward explaining the reinvigoration of epic storytelling in the twenty-first century.

The double narrative technique is crucial in twenty-first-century reinterpretations of epic narratives, as these stories consist of two interleaved narratives the mythological narrative and the modern narrative. Most contemporary writers contrast ancient heroic figures, themes, and events with modern social, cultural, and political realities to stress an interplay of the past and present. This method allows readers to see how mythical questions about heroism, identity, morality, power and fate are still relevant today. Through the interlacing of mythic with present-day elements, in addition to being a means of preserving traditions and adding layers onto an epic past, other writers found ways to reinterpret the stories in order for them to become relevant, tackling modern issues. A remedy to this issue is the double narrative technique, which links myth with modernity, thereby enhancing literary expression and increasing interpretation of epic storytelling.

10. DISCUSSION

Through this analysis, we come to see how modern mythological texts function far beyond basic retelling. Contemporary authors adapt epic stories to serve as mediums for the discussion of pressing social, cultural, environmental, and political concerns. Through revisitations of old stories, writers continue the conversation between what was and what is. Movements in society towards inclusivity and diversity are reflected by aspects like the reinterpretation of heroes and villains, the dismantling of tropes associated heavily with live-action content (like how Hana can shift personalities when using her powers), or editing characters to reflect their diverse backgrounds. The feminist, ecological and postcolonial lenses of mythological discourse have expanded the critical reading of the traditional text. Moreover, the long-term popularity of mythological fiction suggests that myths solve critical cultural and psychological needs. They give symbolic structures that help people and communities make sense of complex realities, and also envision better futures.

11. CONCLUSION

Twenty-first-century literature maintains the deep relevance of mythic tales. Instead of being faded memories now in the public domain, epics are alive and well thanks to continued reinterpretation and adaptation. Writers today use myths to explore current issues like identity, gender, the environment, politics and social justice – illustrating the incredible versatility of these stories. Myth in a Modern World exemplifies the way literature can place ancient traditions into modern contexts. By rewriting the grand narrative, contemporary writers keep cultural memories alive and at the same time reinterpret them according to modern

values and challenges. While human beings still long for compassion, identity and community, myths will remain a source of inspiration for creative writers and cultural commentators alike.

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