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## Indian Mythology: A Revisionist Approach in Contemporary Retellings

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### ABSTRACT

Throughout the generations we Indians have been guided or seeking spiritual progress on the basis of our ancient mythical narratives. Apart from the moral and philosophical enrichment the modern writers have moulded and reinterpreted these stories that resonate more to the young readers. These stories are presented in different colours and are joyous to read blended finely within the realm of modern context with their rich imagination. These modern retellings are attempts to bring out into prominence the characters which are marginalised and presented their point of view with an alternate perspective.

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### Introduction:

Defining Mythology M.H Abrams writes in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*,

“Mythology- a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of duties and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happened as they do, to provide a rational for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives”, (230)<sup>1</sup>.

For the Darwinian theorists myths function as an ongoing and ever-changing process which includes several ways in its extended forms often represented in tales of fantasy. Mythical stories have been told

and re told since ancient time in order to attend positive and healing effects they have on the people of different cultures. These stories play a pivotal role in our believe system. Myths throughout the human history have served as a medium which is most fascinating and thought-provoking creative production within a particular geographical and cultural construct. These myths work as the cultural document of the particular civilizational group. Myths are the treasure house for storytelling, it works as a boon for literary creations and enable us to acquire wisdom. It provides us the multitudes of themes to explore and reinterpret it on the contemporary principles. There are innumerable literary works have been inspired from mythology and are modified and presented in their fine contemporary tunes.

Strelka Joseph views these mythical narratives as the source of great literary creations. She says, “Many literary works serve as excellent examples of the revitalisation of myth. No less worthy of note, it is often myth that gives power and vitality to some of the greatest work of literature”<sup>2</sup>.

The adaptation of myths can be found in songs, philosophies, films, ideas and believes which contribute in shaping our civilization. These myths are found in almost every civilization developed in history in accordance with its cultural, social and geographical contexts bringing out their political and ideological beliefs.

“... myths worked in their ancient contexts – in songs and shows, philosophy art and argument with them- from the politics, films, music, images, ideas and beliefs that still shape today”<sup>3</sup>. (04)

For the German historian Hans Blumenberg myth works as a function to help human beings to understand the realities and course of events of this world and life. For the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss myths are similar irrespective of culture which gives a structure to form our cultural beliefs as a function of language.

For the writer like Devdutt Pattanaik these myths subjective, can be viewed through reference, having cultural contexts which lies on faith. Unlike the Western thought he writes in his book *Myth=Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology* that,

“The Hindu worldview can be startling to those accustomed to a Western thought process, until we challenge the old definition of myth ( ‘ the irrational, the unreasonable, the false’) and embrace a new definition (‘subjective truth expressed in stories, symbols and rituals, that shapes all cultures, Indian or Western, ancient or modern, religious or secular’) The Sanskrit word for subjective truth is mithya- not opposite of objective truth, but a finite expression of Satya, that which is infinite”. (xiii)<sup>4</sup>.

Differentiating between Satya(truth) and myth, he further writes,

“Mithya was truth seen through a frame of reference. Sat was truth independent of any frame of reference. Mithya gave a limited, distorted view of reality; sat a limitless, correct view of things. Mithya was delusion, open to correction.” (xv)<sup>5</sup>

India is known for its rich traditions of storytelling of our glorious ancient pasts. Our myths and legends are told in every household through the form of oral tradition. Every Indian has grown up since their childhood while listening these archetypal stories of our ancient origin. India is known for its diverse culture having enormous wisdom with vast and multi-dimensional themes of mythical narratives and have healing effects upon the common people.

In the Hindu belief system gods and goddesses in the form of incarnations help human beings to follow the Dharma i.e. righteousness. They appear before us as the avatars and work as the force of nature. These myths become more colourful and entertaining when we find our deities like Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu and Shakti i.e. Devi taking different forms in order to establish Dharma, i.e. righteousness by defeating the demons and teach humanity.

No any other Indian classical text has gained popularity and fame as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* originally composed in Sanskrit by sage Valmiki and Sage Vyasa respectively, narrating the tale of Ram and Krishna, the incarnations of Vishnu to establish Dharma.

The *Ramayana* is said to be the oldest epic that teaches the importance of virtues like truth, calmness, patience, love and unselfishness not only for humans but for all living beings; on the other hand, the *Mahabharata* brings before us the moral dilemmas found within everyone. Both these epics praise the victory of good over evil.

Numerous writers have penned their thoughts moulded on these epics in different times of history. Modern Indian fiction writers have successfully made their attempts to rewrite these mythical narratives in accordance with the modern context presenting before us an alternative point of view.

The word ‘**Revisionism**’ (fictional) defines Wikipedia,

“In analysis of works of fiction, revisionism denotes the retellings of conventional or established narrative with significant variations which deliberately “revise” the view shown in the original work. For example, The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood revised the folklore tale of Robin Hood to depict as less

ambiguously heroic, influencing all subsequent modern portrayals. Many original works of fantasy appear to retell fairy tales in a revisionist manner”<sup>6</sup>.

Today's young readers seek for logical, rational and scientific explanations of these methodical narratives and the writers of our time have presented these stories successfully with an alternate point of view often representing the marginalised or subjugated. The modern readers find these retellings more enjoyable, easy to read and also gives pleasure to revisit our past in its modern costumes. Robert A. Segal in his book *Myth: A Very Short Introduction (2004)* writes,

“Yet another reason for the appeal of mythological fiction of today is that fundamental principles like the premise of Karma or the concept of cause and effect through the performance of deeds is discussed in these works. Karmic effect is the basic tenet of religions like Buddhism, Jainism & Hinduism. The popular mythological fiction author has demythologized the myth not eliminating it but by extricating its true, symbolic meaning”. (47)<sup>7</sup>.

Apart from the moral and philosophical entities the modern mythical fiction writings have been moulded in such a way that resonate the young readers. A common Hindu practitioner may not be very much acquainted about our religions, philosophies, despite of it we Indians are very well aware with the concept of Karma i.e. the action. This thought is of supreme importance in Hindu belief system. Deeds performed in past effect our present and future. This idea of Karmic attribution is finely elaborated and explained in Amish Tripathi's *The Secret of the Nagas (2011)* where Shiva the protagonist, in conversation with his uncle was told by him a lesson that,

“It is your karma who fight evil. It doesn't matter if the people that evil is being committed against don't fight back. It doesn't matter if the entire world chooses to look the other way. Always remember this. You don't live with the consequences of other people's Karma. You live with the consequences of your own”<sup>8</sup>. (136)

There was a general perception build earlier that these ancient myths, legends and folklore are nothing but mere superstitions, this thought also gets validation on the basis of rigid social rituals that stands on falsehood. These myths because of such falsehoods seems disappearing and hence an eminent need was felt by the storytellers to reconstruct our myths in its modern sense. One can trace the difference between pre- liberalization and post- liberalization of India. After postliberalisation, India was open to the world and multi-national companies. This led to the massive changes in educated India's life style

and an upsurge is felt in the rise of English-speaking class. Rise in technological advancement and cultural influences within the country gave exposure to foreign films, food, literature and mythology. Today's modern post-liberal readers are seeking for the logical and scientific explanations of these age-old stories. These retellings of ancient stories in the post-colonial India allow us to rebuilt our Hindu belief system that is pluralistic and diversive in its core embibed within the realm of modern principles hoping to revisit their glorious past. Vikram Singh writes in his article,

“It is not out that the Indian fiction scene is going through a generational change where the audience is finally shedding colonial influences and the idea of capitalist superiority. Whatever the intentions of the readers and writers, we can take hope from the fact that these current retellings allow us to reclaim a Hinduism that is pluralistic and diverse. As we retell the ancient tales in our own voices and our own times, we can, for example, question the patriarchal stains in the *Ramayana*, we can recall with pleasure the sexuality in the myths of Shiva, we can revel in the powers of Devi. As parents and grandparents, we can tell these stories to our children and grandchildren in our ways, with our concerns, our politics, our worldviews”<sup>9</sup>. (175-176).

In our contemporary time as well retellings of mythology in the modern costume have gained popularity in the past years. There are many novelists who with their rich imagination have presented these mythical tales before us with a fine blend of modern colours providing a basis for narrating the alternative point of view not present in its original form. More significantly it is quite interesting to note that these modern practice nurses of mythopoeia are of diverse and wearing backgrounds ranging from IIM educated to the discipline of medicine. These writers of diverse field have emerged as the new flag bearers of our tradition of narrating mythical and archetypal timeless tale and have contributed thin part in the ocean of narrating tales, nurturing and enriching our literary universe.

These timeless tales come before every generation in their contemporary costumes. They have adopted and adapted the themes of mythology and presented before us the stories in colourful fabrics without dismantling our established beliefs along with keeping its essence untouched. Apart from the moral or philosophical entities these modern fiction writers of Indian mythology have moulded with so many twists and turns and presented their stories based on the interest of young English-speaking India.

These new age authors have commercialised myths to throw lights on the marginalised characters of these grand narratives. The journeys of the protagonists of these narratives from individual to universal is the true essence behind the success of these modern retellings. Before us these stories are presented

very well in order to entertain us without imposing any specific point of view or ideology. These retellings inform and awake us without making it complex and scary, easy to understand and resonate more to the young English-speaking youths of our country.

Apart from concentrating on the major characters these modern imaginary retellings have given expression to those characters who are marginalized or subjugated in their respective original texts. The voices that are unheard in the epics have found their voices in these new retellings with alternate perspectives. These narratives speak for the downtrodden or vanquished along with it also opines on the present socio-political and cultural aspects.

Writers like Devdutt Patnaik, Ami Ganatra, Amish Tripathi, Chitra Banerjee, Kavita Kane, Koral Das Gupta, Anand Neelkantan, Ashok Banker, and many more have successfully blended Hindu mythology and archetypes with their rich imaginative faculty of minds and presented before us the stories that taste good to the readers of the post-liberal young India.

These stories are both entertaining and educative. They are full of insights and illuminate us as travelled through generations, through the centuries searching for new meanings in each retelling. These modern writers have tried to bring out the priceless treasures from the Indian epics confined within the vast and complex universe of Hindu belief systems. These stories have attempted to find the answers of the questions like what is the interplay between thought and action, taking and giving, self-love and sacrifice? How can we tell right from wrong? What can we do to bring out the best in ourselves and to live a life with purpose and meaning, not just one fuelled by the ego and material needs? In such stories of modern writers our deities or superheroes are described as a common man with flesh and rationality.

It can be said that these novels have translated ancient mythical tales and formed into their modern frameworks mingling it with scientific temperament similar to the Western fantasy tales. They represent the utopian and ideological structure of myth. These novels are imbued with the realities of contemporary society. This re-emerging form of fiction writing can be said to be the outcome of the globalization and the representation of our existential and identical crisis.

These fantasy tales can be categorised along with the Western fantasy tales in which the anxiety of representing our identity crisis gives birth to the myths and archetypes. In the period when technological developments are at its peak, these ancient myths are studied and evaluated minutely in order to disclose or reinterpret the historical and cultural realities moulded in its modern context. These novels include

romance, adventure, philosophy, science, action, thrill and mystery along with the magic realism often embodied in symbols. These stories take their freedom and writers allow their imagination to form the plot where the characters, episodes, settings and contexts are developed artistically in order to present the stories that not only delight the reader but also enable us to think critically in these age-old narratives on the modern parameters.

In her article entitled “Best- Selling Myths”, Reena Singh writes,

“Besides philosophical, spiritual and modern insights, stuff that mythological accounts are renowned for, these new stories like liberties with the plot, often placing characters in a contemporary context. What’s more, all the deep insights is no longer of the kind that sits heavy on your mind; they are reader friendly and pappered with current jargon”<sup>10</sup>.

Another article entitled, “The Decade in Literature”, writes,

“Globalisation has arguably, made “literature” a bigger and richer space for most serious readers, permitting old books to be sold alongside new books, and allowing readers, through the internet, to have a strong say in book discussion and thereby sales”<sup>11</sup>. The article further writes,

“India’s book economy is on a different arc,... Foreign observer of Indian literature in English, the last decade was full of bright lights on all three accounts of publishing, book selling, the destiny and internal diversity of idea of literature, and the spread for a reading culture”.

The attempt to write novels based on Indian mythology in the twenty-first century can be traced back in Ashok Banker’s eight volumes of the *Ramayana* series. Indian myths are the central themes of Amish Tripathi ‘s novels, who is popularly known as the Tolkein of India & the ‘India’s First Literary Popstar’. In his novels some of the major characters are Gods, whereas others are humans or super humans. In the *ShivaTrilogy* Lord Ram is portrayed as God, whereas in the *Ramchandra Series* he has been presented with the attributes of a common man. Both these stories are modelled into the different frameworks of history, myth, fiction, divinity and contemporary scenario. At the outset of *The Immortals of Meluha*, Amish describes Shiva as:

“Shiva! The Mahadeva. The God of Gods. Destroyer of evil. Passionate lover. Fierce warrior. Consummate dancer. Charismatic leader. All powerful, yet uncorruptible. A quick wit, accompanied by an equally quick and fearsome temper”<sup>12</sup>. (xiv)

Shiva in the novels is represented as the destroyer of evil. Because of his heroic deeds he is worshipped as the God. The female characters of his novels are presented as empowered. Sati in the trilogy is full of dignity, courage, charm, wisdom and self-confidence. Sita in the Ramchandra series is a fierce woman and leader who rose against Ravan to defend herself with sword in her hand in the forest who came there to abduct her.

Amish's Shiva trilogy deals with the themes like good and evil, law of Karma, caste system, scientific temperament, geo political issues of modern context and many more. The novel depicts Shiva as a common leader of his Guna tribe and later through his heroic deeds worshipped as God Neelkanth. Here Shiva is described as a Tibet immigrant who first believed the Chandravanshis and the Nagas as evil but later he discovered and came to the realization that good and evil are the two sides of a same coin.

Another remarkable writer Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* (2008) and *Shikhandi- And Queer Tales They Don't Tell You* highlights the gender issues prevalent in the society. 'Inverted image' as a rhetorical device used as an unique style of representation where the natural roles and attributes of man and woman are reversed where the king is portrayed as a pregnant man in the novel *The Pregnant king* (2008). Undoubtedly the novel is distinct in its approach in terms of themes and contents where the natural laws are reversed in a mythical framework.

His Another works including *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010) and *The Boys Who Fought* are the remarkable retellings of the *Mahabharata* and another work – *The Girl Who Chose* written on Sita's perspectives based on the *Ramayana*.

*The Palace of Illusions* (2008) by Chitra Banarjee Diwakaruni is Draupadi's perspective of looking at the things very well narrated on the basis of caste and gender. The novel challenges the traditional belief systems that are constructed in accordance with certain dominant ideologies developed in the form of patriarchy.

Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* opens up a new dimension on the LGBT movement where the writer presents the conflict between an individual's desire and social interests bound in laws. The story tells about a woman who desires to become a king but she can't as she is not male.



Anand Neelkantan in his novel *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012) is the retelling of the *Ramayana* from Ravana's perspective and a minor character Bhadra. The novel portrays the defeated and gives them voice to speak. On the back cover of the book the author writes that,

“The story of the *Ramayana* has never been told. *Asura* is the epic tale of the vanquished Asura people, a story that has been cherished by the oppressed outcasts of India for 3000 years. Until now, no Asura has dared to tell the tale. But perhaps the time has come for the dead and the defeated to speak”<sup>13</sup>.

The novel portrays Ravana as the son of Brahmin father and Asura mother. Ravana in the novel is mistreated by his brother and the emperor of Lanka kingdom. As a true leader he forms an army in order to claim Kuber's throne. Sita in the novel is presented as the daughter of Ravana who was abandoned and ordered to be killed but she survives. Later she married to Ram and when came to forest in exile along with Ram and Lakshmana was abducted by Ravana. Basically, this narrative is based on the *Ramayana* popular in the southern part of India.

His another novel *Ajaya: Role of the Dice – Epic of the Kaurava clan I* is based on the *Mahabharata* where the story is narrated through Kaurava's point of view and presents Suyodhana (Duryodhana) the kaurava Prince far removed from the original epic and epitomizes his qualities like honesty and courage.

His another remarkable tale *Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara* (2018) is based on the lives and stories of great warriors blending it with love, lust and betrayal.

Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019) is tale of the *Ramayana* retold from the perspective of a minor character. Her another novel *Sita's Sister* (2014) is told from Urmila's point of view and depicted Urmila an empowered lady on whom Sita relies upon in most of her decisions.

Commenting on Koral Das Gupta's *Kunti* observes Pavan K. Varma that,

“Koral Das Gupta writes with verve, emotion and passion... (*Kunti*) is must for those wishing to know about our past and dialectics of gender within it”<sup>14</sup>.

*Kunti*, a rare matriarch in the *Mahabharata* and one of the revered PanchaSatis, holds a strong and unsurpassable position in Indian literary imagination based on myth.

“Koral Das Gupta’ gives voice, character and agency to an enigmatic and fascinating female figure from ancient Hindu lore”<sup>15</sup> writes Philip Lutgendrof.

Centuries have passed since the Dharmyuddh of the brothers shook the land of Bharata. The stories of our ancestors are always fascinating for the people. Even today we discuss about the people and their actions described in the epic while defending our favourites and criticizing others. Ami Ganatra’s *Mahabharata Unravelled* debunks myths, popular beliefs and offers deep insights on several aspects which are generally overshadowed solely based on original text composed by Sage Vyasa.

Thus, to conclude it can be said that these contemporary Indian writers have represented the culture and history of India which is plural and divers in its essence. This genre exist for Indian spiritual literature from the vedic period to the present. These mythical stories have provided material for centuries to the writers of India. These structural narratives relate us to the big questions of life which religions have asked and tried to answer.

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