From Myth to Mythya: A Study on the Metamorphosis of Ramayana in Modern India

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Abstract— This article explores the enduring impact of Indian mythology on contemporary literature, particularly through the reinterpretation of ancient epics like the Ramayana. It delves into recent literary works that reimagine these timeless tales, offering fresh perspectives that resonate with modern audiences. Beginning with an overview of Indian mythology's rich tapestry, the article highlights its universal themes and relatable characters, from the noble prince Rama to the resilient Sita. It discusses notable works such as Amish Tripathi's Sita: Warrior Of Mithila, P. Lalita Kumari's The Liberation of Sita, and Anand Neelakantan's Asura: Tale of the Vanquished, which provide alternative viewpoints on familiar mythological narratives. The article also explores the evolution of mythopoeia in Indian epics, emphasizing how these narratives have adapted to contemporary sensibilities while retaining their essence. It discusses the transformative process of "mythya," wherein myths transcend literal truth to convey deeper philosophical truths and allegorical meanings. Moreover, the article delves into the feminist reinterpretation of Indian mythology, spotlighting authors like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Volga, who have reclaimed the voices of subaltern female characters. These retellings offer nuanced portrayals that challenge patriarchal interpretations and provide a platform for marginalized perspectives. Lastly, the article underscores the importance of reclaiming subaltern voices in mythology, showcasing how retellings have amplified the stories of characters traditionally overlooked or sidelined. Overall, it demonstrates the dynamic interplay between ancient mythology and contemporary literature, showcasing the enduring relevance and transformative potential of mythological retellings in shaping our understanding of the human experience.

Keywords— Mythology, Mythopoesis, Modern Indian Mythology, Ramayana, Society

I. INTRODUCTION

In the vast expanse of literature, the echoes of ancient myths persistently reverberate, weaving timeless narratives into the fabric of modern fiction. Literature has long been captivated by mythology, which serves as the bedrock and cradle of numerous cultures and civilizations. Just as the Western world draws inspiration from Greek and Roman mythology, our Indian culture stems from the rich heritage and principles of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, which carry a spiritually vibrant and profound significance. The Vedas, Puranas, and Upanishads have consistently inspired countless literary works. Indian mythology stands out for its extraordinary portrayal of characters leading seemingly ordinary lives despite their divine nature. They are not portrayed as perfect beings but rather reflect a spectrum of human emotions and flaws—love, lust, courage, valor, righteousness, revenge, and violence. Consequently, even in the era of technology and globalization, the enduring popularity and familiarity of Indian mythology inspire modern writers to retell these myths in ways that resonate with contemporary contexts. A new trend has emerged where myths are rewritten, recreated, retold, remembered, reintroduced, and reimagined from a modern perspective, setting the stage for an amalgamation of myth and fiction that has become a hallmark of Indian writing in English. As these myths undergo modification, they retain elements of both their original settings and the present day, making them a bridge between past and present. Indian mythological

texts, though deeply ancient, remain ever fresh in our collective consciousness—age-old like mountains (SarvaPuratana) yet perpetually new like the morning dew (NityaNutana).

II.   REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The book titled *Sita: Warrior Of Mithila* (2017) by Amish Tripathi talks about ancient India around 3400 BCE, the land is torn apart by divisions, resentment, and poverty, leading the people to despise their rulers and the corrupt elite. Exploiting this chaos is Raavan, the demon king of Lanka, who tightens his grip on the troubled region of Sapt Sindhu. Feeling the urgent need for a savior, two powerful tribes, guardians of India's sacred lands, begin their search. Their quest leads them to discover an abandoned infant, saved from wolves by a vigilant vulture in a deserted field. This child, named Sita, is taken in by the ruler of Mithila, a kingdom overlooked and disregarded by others. Despite doubts about her potential, Sita proves to be extraordinary. Her journey unfolds as she rises from orphanhood to become not only a respected prime minister but also a goddess. Amish's latest addition to the Ram Chandra Series embarks on an exciting adventure, exploring the origins of a remarkable figure who transcends mortal boundaries, shaping the destiny of an era. This sequel transports readers back to a time before the very beginning of the epic tale, offering a gripping story of bravery, fate, and divine intervention.

P. Lalita Kumari's *The Liberation of Sita Volga* (2016) is a mesmerizing collection where Ramayana recounts the narrative of Rama's exile and triumphant return to Ayodhya as a just and righteous king, dedicated to his subjects. In Volga's reinterpretation, it is Sita who, abandoned by Rama, embarks on a challenging journey toward self-discovery. Along her path, she encounters remarkable women who have liberated themselves from societal constraints such as husbands, sons, and conventional notions of desire, beauty, and chastity. Characters like Surpanakha, Renuka, Urmila, and Ahalya, typically minor in the traditional epic, guide Sita toward an unexpected resolution. Meanwhile, Rama himself is prompted to reevaluate his roles as both the ruler of Ayodhya and a deeply affectionate husband. "The Liberation of Sita" presents a bold subversion of India's widely known tale of morality, choice, and sacrifice. It offers new perspectives within the established narrative, empowering women to reassess their lives and experiences. This work showcases Volga's prowess as a feminist writer.

Asura: Tale of the Vanquished (2012) published by Anand Neelakantan marks the tale of the Ramayana, recounting Rama's triumph over the demon Ravana, which has been told countless times, typically from the perspective of the victors. But what if Ravana and his people had a different story to share? The Ravanayana, untold until now, narrates the saga of the Asura people, cherished by the oppressed outcastes of India for millennia. Ravana, the Asura leader, speaks from the shadows, questioning why his defiance of the gods and his fight against caste-based Deva rule have led to his vilification. Now, Bhadra, an Asura, adds his voice to the narrative of the defeated, highlighting their struggles under Deva oppression. Initially hopeful under Ravana's leadership, the Asuras soon realize that their situation remains dire. However, Ravana's pivotal actions ultimately alter the course of history, setting the stage for a monumental shift in power dynamics.

Indian Mythology in Literature

Indian mythology serves as a timeless reservoir of wisdom, creativity, and inspiration, woven intricately into the tapestry of literary works across the globe. Rooted in ancient texts such as the Vedas and Upanishads, Indian mythology offers a vivid panorama of gods, goddesses, heroes, and demons, each embodying complex facets of human nature. What distinguishes Indian mythology is its portrayal of divine beings navigating the mundane world, grappling with love, jealousy, ambition, and morality, rendering them relatable to mortals. This fusion of the divine and the human imbues Indian mythology with a universal appeal, transcending temporal and cultural boundaries. Central to Indian mythology is the concept of dharma, the cosmic order governing the universe, and karma, the law of cause and effect. These philosophical underpinnings infuse literary works with profound insights into human existence and moral dilemmas. Writers worldwide draw upon these timeless themes to explore contemporary issues, reinterpreting ancient myths through a modern lens. By juxtaposing the ancient with the contemporary, they illuminate enduring truths about the human condition, fostering a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit.

One of the distinctive features of Indian mythology is its vast pantheon of deities, each with its myths, symbols, and attributes. Whether it's the benevolent Vishnu preserving cosmic order, the fierce Durga vanquishing demons, or the mischievous Krishna enchanting all with his playful antics, these divine personalities serve as archetypes reflecting diverse aspects of human nature. Writers leverage these archetypes to craft complex characters grappling with moral dilemmas, existential crises, and the pursuit of enlightenment, resonating with readers across cultures and generations. Moreover, Indian mythology is replete with epic narratives such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, which chronicle the triumphs and tribulations of heroes and heroines embroiled in cosmic conflicts. These timeless

epics serve as allegories for the perennial struggle between good and evil, righteousness and ambition, echoing the eternal battle within the human soul. Writers draw upon these epics to explore themes of power, justice, loyalty, and redemption, offering fresh perspectives on age-old dilemmas confronting humanity.

Evolution of Mythopoeia in Indian Epics:

The evolution of mythopoeia in Indian epics marks a profound journey from the ancient realm of myth to the contemporary concept of "mythya" through the transformative process of "mythopoesis." This evolution reflects the dynamic interplay between cultural narratives and societal contexts, showcasing how these tales have evolved, adapted, and internalized within Indian culture. Central to this evolution is the work of scholars like Devdutt Pattanaik, who emphasizes the societal role of myth in shaping notions of morality, belief systems, and cultural identity. Mythopoeia, the act of creating myth, serves as a mechanism through which societies construct and transmit their values, traditions, and collective consciousness across generations. In the context of Indian epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, mythopoeia plays a crucial role in not only preserving ancient narratives but also reinterpreting them to suit contemporary sensibilities.

The journey from myth to "mythya" represents a shift from literal truth to symbolic interpretation. As societies evolve, their understanding of myths transcends mere historical accounts to embody deeper philosophical truths and allegorical meanings. This evolution blurs the lines between the archaic and the contemporary, highlighting the timeless relevance and universal appeal of mythological narratives. Through mythopoesis, these epics continue to resonate with audiences by addressing fundamental questions about existence, morality, and the human condition. Moreover, the concept of mythology has undergone a significant transformation in contemporary times. Once confined to specific cultural contexts, mythology has now assumed a vague and broad definition, operating universally and diversely across cultures. This expansion of mythology reflects the interconnectedness of global cultures and the recognition of shared themes and motifs that transcend geographical boundaries.

Ramayana: A Timeless Epic:

The Ramayana stands as a beacon of cultural identity and moral guidance in the vast tapestry of Indian literature. Its enduring relevance lies not only in its historical roots but also in its timeless themes and narrative adaptability. Hailed as a national epic, it transcends geographical and linguistic boundaries, resonating with audiences across generations and cultures. At its core, the Ramayana is a tale of righteousness, duty, and the eternal struggle between good and evil. Through the trials and triumphs of its characters, particularly the noble prince Rama, it imparts profound moral lessons that remain as pertinent today as they were millennia ago. The epic's narrative flexibility allows for diverse retellings, each imbued with the unique cultural nuances and interpretations of its storytellers.

From the original Sanskrit verses penned by Sage Valmiki to the myriad translations and adaptations in various Indian languages and beyond, the Ramayana has undergone countless transformations while retaining its essence. Whether it is through classical poetry, folk songs, theatrical performances, or contemporary literature, the epic continues to captivate audiences with its universal themes of love, sacrifice, loyalty, and redemption. One of the remarkable aspects of the Ramayana is its ability to evolve with the times while retaining its core values. Its characters and their dilemmas are not confined to any specific era but resonate with the human experience across centuries. Whether it is Rama's unwavering commitment to his duty as a prince, Sita's resilience in the face of adversity, or Hanuman's unwavering devotion, these archetypal figures embody timeless virtues that inspire and uplift.

Sage Valmiki declared that: "*Yavat Sthasyanti Girayah Saritascha Mahitale Tavat Ramayanakatha Lokesu Pracharisyati*" i.e Ramayana will be there as long as mountains and rivers exists on the face of the earth. There is a symbolic relationship between the Ramayana and the mountains or the rivers as the mountains stands for men and the rivers for women, because women are the harbingers of change which flows incessantly to bring solace to one and all. It further declared prophetically that as long as there are men and women in this world, the glory of Ramayana will continue to illuminate the world. Sage Valmiki's assertion that the Ramayana will endure "as long as there are mountains and rivers on earth" reflects the eternal nature of its message. Just as the natural landscape remains unchanged, so does the epic's essence, transcending the limitations of time and space. Its symbolism is deeply rooted in the Indian psyche, serving as a cultural touchstone that fosters a sense of unity and belonging. Moreover, the Ramayana's adaptability extends beyond linguistic and cultural boundaries, finding resonance in diverse religious and philosophical traditions. Its themes of dharma (righteousness), karma (action), and moksha (liberation) are central not only to Hinduism but also to Buddhism, Jainism, and other spiritual philosophies. Thus, Ramayana is considered as the "Adikavya" and Valmiki an "Adikavi" "To know the Ramayana is to know India" (Rajagopalachari, 87).

Feminism and Mythological Retellings:

Under the 4th wave, feminism has significantly lost its

significance due to various reasons hence the role of Indian feminism is crucial in transforming this mindset by reinterpreting the age-old epics with a modern lens and presenting before the world the quintessence of pristine feminism that is ingrained in the age-old culture of India. Jabir Jain in his book *Indigenous Roots of Feminism* seeks to analyze the Western feminist movement in India excluding it from the hangover of Western concern and interest. There is an apt observation by (Jain) as he says- "feminism is more than a voice of protest or questioning. It is moral self-reflection, a conquering of inner fears and a realization of self-worth it does not abandon values or relationships, but goes on to create one" (Jain). In the context of Indian feminism, which often intertwines tradition and spirituality, there has been a concerted effort to reclaim women's voices in mythology. This endeavor provides a nuanced understanding of characters like Sita and Draupadi, whose narratives have been traditionally overshadowed by patriarchal interpretations. In the epic Ramayana, Sita is often portrayed as the ideal wife, embodying virtues of loyalty, sacrifice, and chastity. However, feminist readings challenge this one-dimensional portrayal, highlighting the complexities of her character and the injustices she faced. Sita's resilience in the face of adversity and her agency in making critical decisions are emphasized, subverting the notion of her as a passive victim. By reexamining Sita's story through a feminist lens, contemporary literature offers a more multifaceted portrayal that resonates with modern audiences grappling with issues of autonomy and gender dynamics.

The reimagining of these female characters reflects a broader societal shift towards gender equality and empowerment. As feminism gains traction in India and around the world, there is a growing recognition of the importance of diverse and inclusive narratives that challenge entrenched power structures. By centering the voices and experiences of women in mythology, feminist retellings not only provide a platform for marginalized perspectives but also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics and social norms. Moreover, Indian feminism's unique approach, which often draws from traditional wisdom and spiritual teachings, adds depth and complexity to these reinterpretations. By weaving together elements of mythology, spirituality, and contemporary social commentary, feminist authors create narratives that resonate with readers on multiple levels, inviting reflection and dialogue. Feminist perspectives have played a crucial role in reinterpreting ancient epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata to address contemporary issues of gender equality and empowerment. Through nuanced portrayals of characters like Sita and Draupadi, Indian feminism seeks to reclaim the voices of women in

mythology, sparking conversations about autonomy, agency, and throughout the epic Ramayana, there are many female characters, from hermitage and palaces whose characters pose a great deal of enigma, often striving to analyze them from feminist perspective turns into a quest, a discovery of pristine feminism of the past grounded on Indian roots that can reshape and guide the modern feminism and social justice in both literature and society at large.

Reclaiming Subaltern Voices:

In the landscape of literature, retellings of mythology serve as a powerful tool for reclaiming and amplifying the voices of subaltern characters, who are often marginalized or overlooked in traditional narratives. Myth is an authorless story binding a community or society together. But the mythopoeia is inducing transformation in myths that survived many social revolutions and movements, creating a change in the beliefs of the society. The existence of the unheard and unsung heroes of mythology is traced through the advent of mythopoeia, presenting the importance of these heroes in the narrative and history. These mythopoeic texts give voice to these characters and tell their side of the story. The revisionist academicians have brought forth many such perspectives with multiple voices; one such voice is of Urmila, who is popularly given voice by Kavita Kanè in her novel *Sita's Sister*. The revisionist narratives are now being written from different and new perspectives with new ideologies to interpret the narrative and characters, setting the characters that weren't given importance by the conventional authors. Many retellings of Ramayana are bringing the non-elite subalterns of Ramayana to the centre and are being spoken. Texts like *Sita's Sister, Lanka's Princess, Mandodari* and others such narrative give voice to subaltern women characters of mainstream Ramayana. These texts try to give voice to the characters and tell their side of the story behind their actions.

Authors such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Volga have embarked on this transformative journey, reshaping age-old tales to offer alternative perspectives and challenge established power structures. Through their works, they illuminate the experiences and struggles of minor women characters from the Ramayana, contributing to a more inclusive portrayal of history and culture. Mythology, while rich in symbolism and archetypes, has historically been dominated by narratives that center on the exploits and perspectives of privileged individuals, typically men from dominant social groups. However, within these ancient epics lie a multitude of characters whose stories remain untold or relegated to the margins. These characters, often representing subaltern groups such as women, lower castes, or marginalized communities, possess narratives that are

ripe for exploration and reinterpretation.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, through her novel *The Palace of Illusions*, offers a compelling retelling of the Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi, a central but often overshadowed figure in the epic. By placing Draupadi at the forefront of the narrative, Divakaruni not only gives voice to a subaltern character but also offers readers a deeper understanding of the complexities of power, gender, and agency within ancient Indian society. Through Draupadi's eyes, readers witness the injustices and struggles faced by women in a patriarchal world, as well as the resilience and courage required to navigate such environments. Similarly, Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* offers a feminist reimagining of the Ramayana, focusing on Sita, the wife of the legendary hero Rama. In this retelling, Sita emerges as a multifaceted character with agency and autonomy, challenging the traditional portrayal of her as a passive and obedient wife. Volga's narrative sheds light on Sita's inner turmoil, her longing for freedom, and her defiance in the face of societal expectations. Through Sita's journey, Volga not only amplifies the voice of a subaltern character but also critiques the rigid gender roles and oppressive structures prevalent in ancient Indian society.

Modern Indian mythologists that retellings are important and they come up with stories that speak and give a prominent voice to the unvoiced pathos of marginalized characters. The story does not change, it is only the focus of the story that changes. If the original epic portrays Rama as the protagonist, Neelakantan's work brings out Ravana as the tragic hero of the story, rather than the enemy. "My book is an attempt to make the masses realize that everything cannot be black or white. Good and evil, both, co-exist in each of us."

III.   CONCLUSION

The study of mythology is no longer looked as an escape from reality to the world full of fantasy but a journey in search for greater understanding about the universe. In India especially myths have an extraordinary vitality, continuing to give people some truths about themselves, about the human condition. It is no doubt 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, as we retell the ancient tales in our own voices and for our own times, we can, for example, question the patriarchal strains 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, and our worldviews.

We can ensure that the versions of these stories that we choose to share are progressive and free from biasness. The stories themselves are generous and fearless; for centuries, they have opened themselves up to multiple telling, to new twists and turns, to old questions that have new answers. Concluding with a reflection echoing the profound insights by Ramanujan - "The Rama story constitutes a universe so vast that it cannot be defined by a single text or even by a group of texts. Because of this, every interpretation is also a telling & every telling also an interpretation."

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