

Women's Voices in Indian Epics: Between Myth and Reality

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Abstract:

Indian epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata have shaped the cultural and moral frameworks of Indian society. These texts depict women in different roles, ranging from obedient wives to powerful queens, yet their voices are often silenced or overshadowed by patriarchal society. This paper explores the representation of female characters such as Sita, Draupadi, Mandodari, Gandhari, and Kunti, analyzing their struggles for autonomy and justice. This study examines how these women tackle societal expectations, how their stories have been interpreted through patriarchal lenses, and how contemporary retellings have attempted to reclaim their voices. By comparing ancient texts from a modern feminist perspective, this paper highlights the myth-reality divide and its impact on contemporary gender studies.

Keywords: Ramayana, Mahabharata, patriarchal, justice, voices, gender studies.

Introduction:

Ramayana and Mahabharata are two of the most respected and well-known epics of India. They have greatly influenced people's thoughts about gender roles and the place of women in society. These stories often depict women as symbols of goodness, devotion, and sacrifice. However, their voices are usually limited by the rules of a male-dominated society (Thapar, 2018). Women in these epics may seem strong, but are often not given full control over their own lives. They are admired for being loyal, pure, and patient but not always for being smart or independent. Currently, many writers and scholars are researching these stories. They offer new ways of looking at female characters, showing them to be more powerful and thoughtful than previously believed. This paper examines the difference between how women are shown in traditional stories and how they are viewed in modern times. It explores how old stories sometimes hide the real strength of these women, and how newer views try to bring that strength to light.

Women in the Ramayana

Sita: The Ideal Woman or a Symbol of Silent Suffering?

Sita, the central female figure in Ramayana, symbolizes virtue, patience, and unwavering devotion. Her character has been identified as the perfect wife and woman, yet her life is marked by suffering and trial. She willingly went with Rama into exile, showing her loyalty, but her ultimate fate lies being subjected to an agnipariksha (trial by fire) and later abandoning the kingdom, which raises questions about the freedom of women in ancient narratives (Mukherjee, 2020). Sita's silence and tolerance have been glorified by patriarchal ideology, reasserting the notion that a woman's greatest virtue lies in self-sacrifice. However, modern feminist retellings such as Sita's Ramayana by Samhita Arni reinterpret Sita's story through her own voice and narrate her as a woman who questions societal injustice rather than passively accepting it.

Mandodari: Wisdom Overshadowed by Male Dominance

Mandodari, the wife of Ravana, is often overlooked in traditional Ramayana retellings. She is portrayed as a wise and virtuous woman who repeatedly warns Ravana against abducting Sita, yet her voice is ignored (Sharma, 2019). Despite her intelligence and wisdom, she was unable to alter the course of events, highlighting the limited influence of women within male-dominated power structures. Modern interpretations depict Mandodari as a tragic figure whose wisdom is suppressed and overshadowed, reflecting the broader struggle of women who challenge male authority. In feminist retelling, she is given greater depth, showcasing her internal conflict between loyalty to her husband and her awareness of his moral misdoing.

Tara and Ahalya: Women Who Challenge Norms

Tara, the wife of Vali, and Ahalya, the wife of Sage Gautama, both break traditional ideas about how women should behave but in different ways. Tara is shown as a wise and clever woman who gives smart advice to Sugriva and Hanuman, showing her political skills.

Ahalya, on the other hand, is punished for something she is believed to have done wrong, but later, Lord Rama helps her gain respect again (Pattanaik, 2013). Their stories show how women's actions were judged based on the values of their time, often supporting male-dominated ideas that punished or approved women's choices.

Women in the Mahabharata

Draupadi: A Voice of Defiance in a Patriarchal World

Draupadi, a powerful character in Mahabharata, goes against traditional ideas about women by using her intelligence and a strong sense of justice. She bravely questions the fairness of those who stay silent when insulted in the Kaurava court, making her one of the few women in ancient Indian stories who speak out against unfair treatment (Hiltebeitel, 2001). Her marriage to five husbands and her strong demand for justice show that she had her own voice and choices. However, her pain also shows that women were still not safe in a world controlled by men. The novel *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni tells Draupadi's story from her own point of view, showing her feelings, struggles, and strengths.

Gandhari: The Silent Rebellion Against Fate

Gandhari, the wife of Dhritarashtra, chooses to blindfold herself to share her husband's blindness. Many see this as a sign of her love and loyalty, but it can also be seen as a quiet protest against having no control over her life (Doniger, 2014).

Later, after the Kurukshetra War, she curses Krishna out of deep sorrow and anger over the loss of her sons. This moment shows that Gandhari is not just a silent and patient woman but a mother whose grief and strength go beyond the usual image of a woman quietly accepting her fate.

Kunti and Subhadra: Women Who Have Quiet but Strong Influence

Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, plays an important role in Mahabharata by making key decisions that affect her son's futures. She demonstrated smart thinking and strength in difficult situations. Even though she mostly works behind the scenes, her actions guide many major events in the story (Sen, 2017). Subhadra, Krishna's sister, was also a strong and independent woman. She chooses to run away with Arjuna, which goes against the usual expectations of women of her time. Although Kunti and Subhadra may not always speak out loudly, both have a significant impact on how the story unfolds.

The Myth-Reality Divide

Ancient Texts and Women's Voices

Traditional interpretations of the Indian epics often support fixed gender roles that restrict women's freedom. Characters such as Sita and Gandhari are praised for their patience, loyalty, and sacrifice, qualities expected from women. By contrast, women like Draupadi, who speak up or go against social rules, are often seen as troublemakers or causes of conflict (Chakravarti, 1990). This shows how old stories encouraged women to stay within certain limits and punished those who stepped outside.

The Patriarchal Lens in Traditional Interpretations

Many versions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata have been influenced by male-centered views that highlight women's obedience and self-sacrifice. For example, Sita is often remembered for her purity and Gandhari for her loyalty to her husband. These qualities are praised, whereas other parts of the stories are ignored. This focus supports male power and control instead of showing the full depth and strength of these women (Lutgendorf, 2017).

Modern Reinterpretations:

Women in Contemporary Indian Literature and Cinema

Today, many authors and filmmakers are retelling stories of women from Ramayana and Mahabharata in fresh and powerful ways. These modern retellings focus on the voices, thoughts, and feelings of women, which are often ignored in older versions. Instead of showing them only as wives or mothers, these stories highlight their strengths, intelligence and struggles. One example is *The Palace of Illusions* by Banerjee Divakaruni. This novel tells the story of Draupadi from her own perspective. Instead of just being known as the wife of the Pandavas, Draupadi is shown to be a smart and strong woman who questions injustice and wants control over her own life. The book gives her a voice and helps readers to understand her emotions and decisions. Another example is *Sita's Ramayana*, by Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar. This graphic novel depicts Sita's story from her own perspective. It not only focuses on her role as Rama's wife but also on her strength, courage, and sadness. It makes readers think about how Sita felt during her journey and how she was much more than just a symbol of purity. These new stories are important because they provide a space for women's experiences. They help us see that the female characters in the epics were not just silent or passive; they had their own voices, dreams, and pain. Modern literature and films are helping to show a fuller picture of these women and are making their stories more relatable to today's readers.

Feminist Adaptations and Their Impact

Feminist adaptations of Indian epics are changing how we understand women in these stories. In the older versions, women were often shown as silent, obedient, and always sacrificing others. However, feminist writers and filmmakers are now retelling these stories in a way that gives women more power and importance (Ray, 2012). These new versions show that women like Sita, Draupadi, and others have feelings, thoughts, and strengths. They did not just suffer quietly; they questioned unfairness, made tough choices, and sometimes even stood up against injustice. Instead of only showing their pain, these stories talk about their courage and how they try to take control of their lives.

For example, instead of focusing only on Sita's loyalty, feminist adaptations explored how she felt when she was asked to prove her purity or live in the forest. They show her as a woman with emotions and dignity, not just someone who follows the orders. These retellings help people today, especially young readers, see epic women as real and strong, not just as ideal wives or mothers. They also help challenge the old ideas that women should always be quiet and obedient. In this way, feminist adaptations have made a big impact by changing how we view women in these ancient stories and inspiring a more equal way of thinking.

The Relevance of These Characters in Modern Society

The problems faced by women in Ramayana and Mahabharata are still seen today. Questions about a woman's honor, freedom to make choices, and pressure to follow society's rules are still very common. That is why the stories of characters such as Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, and others are still important—they help us understand the struggles that many women face even now. When we look at these women through modern eyes, we can see that they were not just characters from a long time ago. They went through situations that are similar to what many women experience today: being judged for their actions, not being allowed to speak up, or having to choose between what they want and what society expects from them. By retelling their stories in new ways, writers can help us think more deeply about gender roles and equality. These reinterpretations help us learn from the past and understand the present. They asked important questions about fairness, freedom, and respect for women. In this way, the women from the epics are not just part of old stories; they are symbols of strength and change that still matter in today's society.

Modern Feminist Writing Gives Voice to Women in Epics

Modern feminist writers have helped us see the women of Ramayana and Mahabharata in a new light. In the past, most stories focused on male heroes, and only showed women as supporting characters. However, today, many authors are rewriting these epics to highlight women's thoughts, feelings, and struggles. This gives female characters a voice that is often missing in traditional versions. For example, in *The Forest of Enchantments* by Banerjee Divakaruni, Sita tells her story. Instead of just being known as Rama's wife, Sita is shown as a brave and thoughtful woman who questions the injustice she faces. In *Yajnaseni* by Pratibha Ray, Draupadi shares her side of the story, showing her pain, anger, and strength. These books help readers understand that these women were not weak or passive; they were strong individuals with emotions and opinions. By telling the story from a woman's point of view, modern feminist writing helps balance the male-dominated narrative of the past. This allows us to hear what women might have felt and thought during those times. This kind of storytelling is important because it brings fairness and depth to the way ancient texts are understood. It also inspires readers today, especially women, to speak and claim their own voices.

Conclusion:

The way women are portrayed in the Indian epics is both powerful and painful. Some women, such as Draupadi and Kunti, show great strength, cleverness, and influence. Others, such as Sita and Gandhari, show how women are often expected to suffer quietly and follow strict rules set by society. Today, feminist writers retell these stories in new ways. They give women characters more voices and show their thoughts, emotions, and strengths. These new versions help us better understand these women and connect their stories to the struggles that women still face today. In this way, modern retellings help us see the difference between what the old stories said and what the characters might have truly felt.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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