

The Politics of Retelling Indian Epics and Contemporary Mythopoesis

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by

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis titled ***The Politics of Retelling Indian Epics and Contemporary Mythopoesis*** submitted by **Sreekutty T J** bearing registration number **17HEPH08** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in English is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

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A. The student has the following publication before submission of the thesis for adjudication and has produced evidence for the same in the form of acceptance letter or the reprint in the relevant area of his research:

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3. EN 823	Mythology: Background Readings	4	Pass

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DECLARATION

I, **Sreekutty T J**, hereby declare that this thesis entitled ***The Politics of Retelling Indian Epics and Contemporary Mythopoesis*** submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of **Dr. Girish D Pawar, Assistant Professor, Department of English**, is a bonafide research work. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this university or any other university or institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodganga/INFLIBNET. A report of plagiarism statistics from the University Librarian is enclosed.

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Chapter One

Introduction: The Discourse of Retellings

1.1. Original versus Versions

The culture of a nation is inevitably associated with its epics. In India, especially Hinduism is mainly based on the two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Even today, they are propagated orally as well as in written forms that never seem to exhaust new interpretations. They are not mere works of art meant for entertainment but are endowed with specific agendas and purposes that affect the lives of human beings. As a result, epics were politically relevant in a society whose order and stability were established through a storytelling tradition.

A study of the narrative strategies, the politics of retellings, contemporary mythopoesis, and the market are some of the main concerns of this study. The debate on the ‘original’ texts is highly complex. As Devdutt Pattanaik remarks in *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*:

The earliest references to *Puranas* and *Ithihasas* can be found 2800 years ago in the *Shatapatha Brahmana*- however, the stories that were told then are unknown. They may have included the story of Ram and Krishna, but we cannot be sure. A little over 2000 years ago, after centuries of oral transmission, these stories were refined and reframed as the Sanskrit epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. It is these reframed and refined retellings that we today consider as the ‘original’. (7)

There is no access to these ‘originals’ except in English translation¹, and there are questions regarding the Sanskrit versions, like whether the *Uttarakandam* is an integral part of the

¹ Manmatha Nath Dutt’s *Valmiki Ramayana in English Prose Translation in 7 Volumes* for the *Ramayana* and Kisari Mohan Ganguli’s *Translation of Mahabharata by Krishna- Dwaipayana Vyasa* for the *Mahabharata* are consulted for reference. They are said to be the first Indian translators of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, respectively.

‘original’ *Ramayana*. There are poetical re-renderings and retellings in vernacular languages like Thunchath Ezhuthachan’s *Adhyathma Ramayana* in Malayalam, *Dandi Ramayana* in Odiya by Balaram Das, and the same is the case with the *Mahabharata* too. Multiple folk versions of the two epics have circulated orally until some were later compiled in writing. The epics have also given rise to several dramas, like Bhasa’s *Pratima Nataka* and *Urubhangam* (both in Sanskrit, based on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, respectively.) There are various adaptations in the form of plays in vernacular languages like *Kanchana Sita* by C N Sreekantan Nair in Malayalam and also Buddhist and Jain versions of the epics like *Dasarata Jataka* along with South East Asian variations (like *Ramakien* in Thailand and the Malay version of the *Mahabharata* called *Hikayat Perang Pandawa Jaya*). However, this study is based on contemporary retellings in the Novel form, either in English or English translations.

1.2. Myths: The Significance

Myths play an essential role in creating frameworks for the smooth functioning of a society. In the introduction to Joseph Campbell’s *The Power of Myth*, it is said that “For the law to hold authority beyond mere coercion, the power of the judge must be ritualized, mythologized. So must much of life today, from religion and war to love and death” (Introduction). Indian epics fulfil this function. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are considered the two ‘religious’ texts that were and still, according to some, are more or less like constitutions to govern people’s lives. Claude Levi-Strauss adopts a paradigmatic approach to studying myths in the text *Myth and Meaning*. According to him, owning one’s myth is very important – in order for a culture to be really itself and to produce something, the culture and its members must be convinced of their originality and even, to some extent, of their superiority over the others” (15). This attitude of recognizing the originality of myths helps people own their culture. Therefore, myths are constantly significant.

As society changes, there will be significant changes in the practices of people. The traditional ways of life are changing daily with scientific and technological developments every day. Therefore, traditional stories do not fulfil the need of the time. As Levi-Strauss² says, “... the greatness and the superiority of scientific explanation lies not only in the practical and intellectual achievement of science, but in the fact that science is becoming able to explain not only its validity but also what was to some extent valid in mythological thinking” (18). As Roland Barthes elucidates in *Mythologies*, new myths are created according to the existing social system of a particular period. In the second part of this ‘Myth Today’, Barthes explains the relevance of myths as a form of speech and their political nature. Myths change and attain a different signification according to the norms, values, and ideals of its society. Inspired from Ferdinand de Saussure’s idea of the sign, Barthes describes the feature of myths. A myth is a signifier, and the meaning attributed to the myth is the signified. The meaning of a myth is determined by the context in which it exists. Therefore, it has a historical relevance. As the context change, the meaning of myths changes too. The current research explores this feature of myths.

Earlier, the mode of telling mythical stories was through poetry (epic), but today the mode has changed mainly to prose. Though specific ideas of the past have been retained, there are significant changes in the narrative style that have challenged some of the closed and rigid norms, such as the lack of female agency in political affairs, the concept of chastity as synonymous with submissiveness (concerning the characters like Sita and Draupadi), open sexuality as diabolic (Surpanakha), queerness as an ill-omen (Shikhandi), and many other themes. These are some reasons why stories from the epics are retold, and mythopoesis is a constant process.

² ibid

When certain narratives of the past become obsolete, there arises a necessity to retell them with appropriate changes to appeal to the public because, if one is to go by the definition of myths by Campbell in *The Power of Myth*, “myths are clues to our deepest spiritual potential, able to lead us to delight, and even rapture” (Introduction). Similarly, James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* explains that rituals are the basis of myths meant to establish societal order. For instance, the Mikado in Japan is the king who is considered an incarnation of a particular deity who must ensure the availability of rain and vegetation. If he does not fulfil this condition, he will be punished. There was no hierarchy based on power, which has changed with time. Rekha Pande, in the article, “The Bhakti Movement: An Interpretation,” talks about the Bhakti Movement in the 14th and 15th centuries AD –

There was the Brahmanical oppression of the worse kind. In order to maintain their status quo, complex rites and rituals were practiced by them and those who did not fit into the traditional four castes were termed outcastes or chandalas. By this time Jainism and Buddhism had practically disappeared and it was orthodox Brahmanism that had reigned supreme over the whole of India. They alone understood Sanskrit in which the ancient religious texts were produced, and this made the performance of various rites and rituals their monopoly. (216)

In India, too, times have changed, and the retellings become discourses primarily associated with *karma* and *dharma*.

The codes of morality and law were based chiefly on *karma* for the common good rather than considerations of individual freedom and self-expression. This is challenged in some of the retellings. For instance, in Kavita Kane’s *Lanka’s Princess*, Surpanakha is explicit about her sexual desires; however, she is not portrayed as an evil character but as an oppressed one. Through this, the author discusses the open sexual desire of a woman, which is taboo in some, if not all, parts of the world. Also, Ahalya in the *Ramayana* is a ‘fallen

woman' who sleeps with another man than her husband (even though probably unwittingly), which is interpreted as a severe crime out of the 'misreading'³ of the 'original' epics (and this has not changed all that much till this day) and has led to her punishment of being turned into a stone. However, in two modern retellings of the *Ramayana*, *The Liberation of Sita* by Volga and *Ahalya's Awakening* by Kavita Kane, Ahalya voices her mind on the concepts like chastity and trust in marriage. It must be noted that in the examples mentioned above, the polity has changed with time. Each polity has its own set of rules that are expected to be followed by any individual despite his/her gender or class symbolized by the characters in the novels. The study has focussed on similar issues of socio-political relevance explicit and implicit in the texts taken for analysis and how they contribute to contemporary mythopoesis.

1.3. Primary Texts

The study has been undertaken to analyze the nature of intergeneric adaptations from epic to novel. Selected retellings of both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are taken mainly because of their popularity known from the peripheral inquiry of the texts that show that many editions are still coming up for some of the retellings, and many of them top the bestseller lists. For instance, *Randamoozham* by M T Vasudevan Nair has been translated into more than six Indian languages and English (*Bhima: Lone Warrior* translated by Gita Krishnankutty). Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjaya* in Marathi has been translated into over 16 languages, including English. Amish Tripathi's *Ramchandra Series* is the second fastest-selling book series in Indian publishing history, according to several online sources.

There is always an allegedly inferior status attributed to popular fiction as it is defined by what it is not, 'Literature.' In the essay titled, "Popular Culture Studies: The Advantages

³ The misreading can be influenced by the existing social norms of a particular period. For instance, according to Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, "sexual activities against the order of nature" (specifically, homosexual relationships) were illegal, and after its abrogation, the situation is gradually changing like Nived and Rahim, who is the first gay couple in Kerala legally married, as per several newspaper reports (see Bibliography for details)

of a New Field,” Matthew Schneider-Mayerson discusses the common interpretation of popular fiction: “Whereas ‘Literature’ is indifferent to (if not contemptuous of) the marketplace, original and complex, popular fiction is simple, sensuous, exaggerated, exciting and formulaic” (22). Sociologist Tony Bennett sees popular fiction as evidence of “both symptom and cause of a generalized social problem of cultural degeneracy” (xi). However, the appeal of popular fiction does not only rely on its publicity but also on the socio-cultural significance it holds. According to Schneider-Mayerson, “one advantage of considering popular fiction as a separate field would be to isolate its particular political economy and cultural position. More attention must be paid to the specific factors of consumption” (31). Pierre Macherey supports this argument in *A Theory of Literary Production*, in which he says that popular fiction reflects socio-political currents rather than considering social context as mere background or focused on an author’s biography. Thus, the chosen texts need to be studied further to see the social, political, and cultural significance of the popular genre, the novel.

One of the reasons for considering the retellings of both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* is due to their timeless socio-political significance. Devdutt Pattanaik in *Ramayana versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison* displays the parallels and differences between these two epics, which show that both are congruent and complement each other. He says, “... the two epics brought together the worldliness of the Rig Veda, the mystical wisdom of the Upanishads, and the directives of the Dharma-Shastras” (11). There are translations from regional languages and direct Indian English retellings. This section summarizes the texts chosen, the reasons for choosing them, and their relevance to the current study.

The current research has studied works by Amish Tripathi, Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee, Kavita Kane, M. T. Vasudevan Nair, P. K. Balakrishnan, Pratibha Ray, and Volga. Brief accounts of the selected texts are given below in chronological order:

1.3.1. *Battle Beyond Kurukshetra* (1973) by P. K. Balakrishnan

This is a translated text from Malayalam titled *Ini Njan Urangatte* (literally ‘Now Let Me Sleep’), initially published in 1973 and translated by P K Jayalekshmy in 2017. The text philosophically views the transience of life through Draupadi, who suffered most of the losses in the Kurukshetra war. The narration begins after the war, and Draupadi views the battlefield with significant stress, due to which dreams and the inability to sleep haunt her. The fragility of the fraternal bond shared by the Pandavas is exposed when Arjuna attempts to behead Yudhishtira when the latter’s words hurt his ego. The Draupadi in this text is exhausted and attains a stoic nature due to repeated loss of hope. The complicated nature of war and its aftermath from the perspective of Draupadi are the significant concerns of the study. Through Draupadi, the frailties of Yudhishtira are exposed. For instance, after the Kurukshetra war, he decides to do penance in the forest for the sin of fratricide because he gave consent to kill Karna. The irony is that he does not care about the death of numerous innocent people in the war but mourns only for his brother Karna.

1.3.2. *Bhima: Lone Warrior* (1984) by M.T. Vasudevan Nair

This text is translated into English by Gita Krishnankutty, and the title of the original text is *Randamoozham* (literally ‘Second Turn’). The central character is Bhima, and it is his version of the story of the rivalry between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. He is critical of his brothers and the deeds of their mother, Kunti. The text discusses issues of the subaltern mainly through Bhima. For instance, Bhima describes his anguish about abandoning Hidimbi because she belonged to the lower class as a tribal woman. Similarly, he views the story of Ekalavya from a different perspective which involves the politics of discrimination.

1.3.3. *Yajnaseni* (1984) by Pratibha Ray

The novel was written first in Odia by Pratibha Ray, and the English translation was done by Pradip Bhattacharya in 1995. The *bhakti bhava* of Draupadi is discussed in detail in this text. Her devotion to Krishna and how he governs her life are some of the major concerns of the text. Draupadi does not have an identity of her own, unlike Draupadi in other retellings. The theme of the novel is the *sakha-sakhi* bonding, that is, the spiritual friendship shared between Draupadi and Krishna. She is guided by Krishna and Maya, her companion provided by Krishna. She realizes her true self only after she falls in the middle of her journey to heaven. The characteristic features of the Pandavas are viewed through Draupadi, leading to various interpretations, which can also be seen in the other retellings.

1.3.4. *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) by Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee

The text has Draupadi as the narrator, and the story of the conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas is explained through her point of view. The central point to be noted in this text is the ability of Draupadi to view the battlefield as Sanjaya, the charioteer of Dhritarashtra. The text explores the internal conflicts of Draupadi, who was born as an undesired daughter to her father and the wife of five husbands who never tried to know her heart. It must be noted that Draupadi is the one who leads her husbands; for example, she guides them to the battlefield after the war to see Karna's dead body. Also, she speaks for the Pandavas to the widows of Hastinapur, who hated them for the Kurukshetra war. Even though she does everything for her husbands, none of them genuinely loves her. Finally, Karna holds her hand when she ascends to heaven.

1.3.5. *Karna's Wife: The Outcaste Queen* (2014) by Kavita Kane

The author brings in a fictional character, Uruvi (Uruvi is not in the 'original' epic), to explore the problems of Karna and his internal conflicts. Through Uruvi, the author analyses the problems of single mothers, the plight of orphaned children, the issues of caste (as the

subtitle indicates), and the restricted freedom of women. Uruvi is not only the narrator of events from a different perspective but acts as a foil for Karna. For example, after Kunti requests Karna not to kill his brothers (the Pandavas), Karna accepts it without showing any pain. Nevertheless, Uruvi questions Kunti about her selfishness which Karna cannot do. Also, it is to Uruvi that Draupadi confesses her love for Karna (in the other retellings from Draupadi's point of view, one comes to know about this only through Draupadi's thoughts).

1.3.6. *Sita's Sister* (2014) by Kavita Kane

Urmila is the central character, and the novel progresses from her point of view. Here, Urmila is a strong woman, and Sita depends on her for most of the decisions in her life. She is educated and questions men during instances of injustice. The 'original' stories say that Urmila was in a fourteen years long sleep until Lakshmana returned from exile, but in the present text, the sleep is symbolic and realistically justified. She is the one who gives strength to Lakshmana when he is demotivated. In this novel, Kaikeyi is forgiven for all her 'negative' deeds through Urmila, who comes to know the real story behind Kaikeyi's motives. At the same time, Kausalya, who is always seen as Dasaratha's meek and gentle wife, is portrayed as a woman with jealousy and constantly complains about her unsuccessful marital life.

1.3.7. *Scion of Ikshvaku* (2015) by Amish Tripathi

It is the first text in the *Ramachandra Series* as a bildungsroman. The story begins with the birth of Rama and his development as a noble leader. The text is studied because new characters are introduced, and the 'original' characters are changed to fit into the new narrative. In addition to this, some incidents are deliberately added in an attempt to increase the contemporariness of the story. For instance, there is an instance of gang rape of Mandhara's daughter Roshni in which a juvenile, Dhenuka, is involved, which indicates the Delhi rape case. The debate between Rama and Bharata on this issue reflects the arguments over punishments given to criminals in these cases. Another interesting aspect of this text is

the new roles given to characters. For example, Manthara is a wealthy merchant in Ayodhya, and Kubera is another merchant seeking help from Raavan in order to fight the injustice he faced in Ayodhya regarding trade rules (he is not shown as Raavan's brother, which he is in the 'original' story). The text hints at the following text in the series - *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*.

1.3.8. *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (2017) by Amish Tripathi

This text is the second book in the *Ramachandra Series*, where Sita is portrayed as the incarnation of Vishnu instead of Rama and comes under the bildungsroman genre. The text is a feminist rendering of the epic with Sita and her mother Sunaina at the center, who are capable of ruling the kingdom of Mithila, shadowing King Janak, who is a scholar interested only in reading and philosophical debates rather than focusing on the affairs of the kingdom. Another significant change of character is that of Hanuman, who is equal to Sita's elder brother and gives her archery lessons. The text has many deviations like these from the traditional stories of the *Ramayana*; for instance, Sita is trained by Vishwamitra to be the next Vishnu, as a part of which she travels the whole country. Also, during her kidnapping by Raavan and his men, Sita fights until she is overpowered by Samichi (another new character), her minister, Raavan's spy.

1.3.9. *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta* (2019) by Amish Tripathi

It is the third book in the *Ramachandra Series*, and it is the story of Raavan, beginning from his childhood. The novel explores the development of Raavan as a warrior and a man who respects only one woman in his life. He is portrayed as cruel but not evil. This aspect of Raavan as the anti-hero (not villain) is deeply explored in the novel, with many new events added which are not talked about in the 'original' epic. In the text, Sita is said to be the daughter of Vedavati, the love interest of Raavan. The destruction of Raavan is predestined,

and it can be done only by Sita. Therefore, she is the next Vishnu. The text ends with a hint of war; other events are in the fourth book, *The War of Lanka*⁴.

1.3.10. *The Liberation of Sita* (2016) by Volga (translated by T. Vijayakumar and C. Vijayashree)

This text is in the form of short chapters with different female characters inspiring Sita to choose her path of freedom. The female characters are Shurpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka Devi, and Urmila. They talk about the nature of beauty, chastity, and power through their life experiences from which Sita creates her own identity. The text problematizes the stories of these women in the ‘original’ epic. Also, the concluding chapter is narrated by Rama, who confesses his mistakes and agony at losing Sita. The final chapter deals with Rama’s state of mind when he loses everything he loves and his slow transformation to a noble leader because of Sita. Not only Sita’s but also Rama’s liberation is discussed here.

1.3.11. *Lanka’s Princess* (2017) by Kavita Kane

The novel is narrated from the first-person point of view. Shurpanakha, one of the underrated characters of the *Ramayana*, is shown as a woman with open sexual desires, and the provoked revenge mentality becomes the reason for her downfall. The text shows the tender side of Shurpanakha in contrast to the traditional evil stories about her. Her sexuality, motherhood, and her wrath at the denial of rights are some of the themes given importance in this text. Also, Ravana is the anti-hero (not an evil womanizer) here. He is hurt to see his sister attacked by Rama and Lakshman. Also, he wages war against Rama not only to have Sita but also to seek vengeance for his sister’s deformity. There are instances new to the traditional stories like Shurpanakha going to Ayodhya to kill Lakshmana to avenge her son’s death. The narrator is Shurpanakha, and the *Ramayana* is viewed from her perspective.

⁴ Not a part of this study

1.3.12. *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* (2017) by Kavita Kane

The story of Satyawati and her progress as the queen of Hastinapur is discussed in this text. It is a feminist rendering of the epic which narrates the transformation of Matsyagandha to Yojanagandha (other names of Satyawati) and how she uses her femininity as a weapon to wield power. In this text, the author traces the beginning of sibling rivalry between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Though she gains power, her desperate and vain attempts to maintain it marks the beginning of the fall of Hastinapur in the future. The other female characters in the novel - Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika - are portrayed as victims of Satyawati's desire to build a strong dynasty. Even though she succeeds in having strong successors, the kingdom does not remain stable in their hands due to the fragile and shaken bonds they share. The narration ends with the suggestion that the fall of the Fisher Queen dynasty, rather than the decline of the Bharata dynasty, is what we witness.

1.3.13. *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019) by Kavita Kane.

The traditional version presents Ahalya as a woman who 'sinned' (knowingly or otherwise) and is therefore cursed to spend eons as a stone. In the present text, Ahalya speaks openly about gender relations, marital trust, sexuality, and scholarship. Here, as in Volga's text, Ahalya interacts with Sita and helps clarify her doubts. Also, her relationship with Indra is complicated. He is said to be the friend of Ahalya's brother. He is shown to have lust towards Ahalya for a long time, and Ahalya knows about it.

1.3.14. *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) by Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee

Here, Divakaruni draws upon Sita's identification and bond with earth/nature to use her gardening skills, knowledge of herbs, healing touch, and enchantment with the forest as part of her vision. Sita writes her story along with the other female characters' stories. Valmiki asks her to compose it. The character of Sita views several instances from the epic from a different point of view. In this text, Sita is portrayed as an earnest learner of weaponry. She

chooses to be saved by Rama than use her skills to escape from the Ashoka Forest.

Ultimately, she chooses to be with her mother Earth than be with a suspicious husband.

However, she forgives him, which completes her liberation.

1.4. Literature Review

The Other Ramayana Women: Regional Rejection and Response, edited by John Brockington and Mary Brockington, is a collection of essays on different perspectives of reading the *Ramayana*. It deals with contemporary concerns about gender and cultural values in the epic. According to its editors, this text aims to analyze “the complexity of the relationships between different readings, different versions, and the singularity of the work itself” (Foreword). The text also focuses on the role of women and how the epic is a sign of historical and social relationships. John Brockington’s essay in this collection titled, “Recreation, Refashioning, Rejection, Response...How the Narrative Developed” suggests the necessity to study the female characters deeply. He says that “each woman dominates a moment of crisis in the body of the story as well as in their individual lives, only to be rapidly reduced to secondary status in the overall narrative scheme” (Introduction). The other essays also show how the narrative scheme works and examine the equal role played by the “secondary women” in the epic.

Muktilakhi Mangharam, in the essay titled “Rama, Must I Remind You of Your Divinity? : Locating a Sexualized, Feminist, and Queer Dharma in the *Ramayana*” is as she claims, a sexualized reading of the epic to suggest its importance as a manifesto to empower women and their experiences of sexualities destabilizing the stereotypes of gender and sexual roles. The author challenges any hegemonic readings of the epic and the ‘appropriation process that spreads subversive interpretations of the story. She critiques the attempts of certain mainstream political parties to propagate ‘Hindutva,’ which is a political movement rather than a social one intending to make, “a culturally homogenous nation dominated by a

self-defined Hinduism” (78). She dwells on the stories of women in the epic, analyzing their roles in shaping the stereotypes about women even now.

Luis Gonzalez-Reimann, in the essay titled, “The Divinity of Rama in the *Ramayana* of Valmiki” brings in the ideas of Sheldon Pollock, the translator of the critical edition of *Aranyakanda* (the third book of the *Ramayana*). The divinity of Rama is questioned and challenged in this essay. According to Pollock, Rama is more than a man - a god-man. The author says that the divinity attributed to Rama might have been a later addition to the epic, establishing the significance of retellings. Luis points out that Rama is an exceptional human being regarding adventures and wars. He brings references from different versions of the *Ramayana*, like the *Adhyatma Ramayana*, to show how divinity was attributed to Rama. Though Pollock advocates viewing the epic as a whole to understand Rama’s divinity, Luis criticizes it throughout the essay.

Wendy Doniger, in the essay, “Sita and Helen, Ahalya and Alcema: A Comparative Study” analyses two sets of women in ancient Indian Mythology and ancient Greek mythology to discover their similarities and differences. She makes a cross-cultural comparison (not a universal one) of Sita, Helen, Ahalya, and Alcema to show how gender transcends culture.

Alf Hiltebeitel focuses on Classical Hinduism in the essay, “Epic Studies: Classical Hinduism in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*”. The author attempts an overview of epic studies from twenty years before 1993. He focuses only on the Sanskrit version of the text, almost avoiding any regional or folk variations that give rise to ‘popular Hinduism’. He believes that no matter how many versions of the epics have come, the privilege of Valmiki *Ramayana* and Vyasa’s *Mahabharata* is not lost. He considers these epics, “monumental literary achievements of a culture, whose complexity and archetypal pre-eminence were never replicated, challenged, or trivialized by any of their classical alternates

or folk retellings” (1). The research undertaken would give importance to this argument and would focus on the necessity of rethinking Classical Hinduism.

Pamela Lothspeich’s essay, “The *Mahabharata* as National History and Allegory in Modern Tales of Abhimanyu” concerns Maithilisharan Gupta’s narrative poem *Jayadrath-vadh* written in 1910. The author attempts to show how Gupta modernizes the poem and connects it to nationalist ideology. Abhimanyu is seen as a freedom fighter battling against an imperial force, Jayadrath. The author says that Gupta made Abhimanyu an ideal Hindu character who would be a role model for the Indian youth that can reform Indian society. Similarly, he made Uttara an epitome of sacrifice for the nation’s quest for sovereignty. He opines about women, stating: “While not active agents in the public battle, [women] were to be sacrificing and supportive wives and mothers, as well as spiritual bulwarks in the private sphere” (295). Through this essay, the author points out that “epic history is often recast as national history and epic narratives are inscribed with allegorical significance” (279).

In an article titled “The Great Epic of India as Religious Rhetoric: A Fresh Look at the *Mahabharata*,” James L Fitzgerald compares the *Mahabharata* (which he calls the *Great Bharata*) to the idea of temple. According to him, the epic reveals a new vision of the cosmos and the place of a rightly ordered human society in that cosmos. He says that,

Like the temple, the *Great Bharata* presented [the] cosmos to the senses and imagination of its audience in such a way that its members could envision themselves within it and intuit its structure or apprehend the movement across its time and in such a way that they would know and feel their proper place, and so perform their proper actions in the cosmos. (612)

This idea is closely connected with Joseph Campbell’s ideas in *The Power of Myths*, in which he talks about how myths and the speculation of the journey towards inner spiritual

realization would elevate human beings to a different plane of existence. The research would consider how contemporary mythopoesis interferes and contribute to this idea of the epic.

The article, “The Subversive Nature of Virtue in the *Mahabharata*: A Tale about Women, Smelly Ascetics and God” by Arti Dhand is about the act of *niyoga* (the custom of levirate marriage) between Vyasa and the Bharata widows Ambika and Ambalika. It focuses on the importance of *niyoga* in the construction of the epic plot and the personality and motives of Ved Vyasa. The *niyoga* in the mentioned episode is a test of virtue. The two women failed because of their indulgence in desires and expectations. This negative association of desire with virtue is questioned and analyzed further.

Bruce M Sullivan relates Vyasa to Brahma in the article, “The Religious Authority of the *Mahabharata*: Vyasa and Brahma in the Hindu Scriptural Tradition”. Vyasa is considered the symbolic representation of the anonymous poets who are considered to have contributed to the composition of the epic. The article decentralizes the sole authority of Vyasa as the authentic author of the epic. Through him, the epic poets evoke the image of Brahma, the deity of creation and knowledge. As a result, Vyasa’s *Mahabharata* is linked to Brahma’s *Veda*, thereby validating the idea that *Mahabharata* is the fifth *Veda*: “a new *Veda* for a new era and all people, and augmented the status and religious authority of the *Mahabharata*” (398).

The essay, “Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*” by Brian Black analyses the character of Draupadi from three dimensions - as a divine figure with a cosmic destiny, as a victim of sexual abuse, and as a female scholar who contributes to the principle of *dharma* in the epic. These dimensions can be extended further to three larger frameworks: the mythological dimension, an epic narrative about war and suffering women, and a philosophical discourse. The thesis will explain these ideas with examples from the chosen primary texts.

The study conducted by Tamar C Reich is an attempt to find ‘closure’ in the *Mahabharata*. A narrative closure refers to the resolution reached when the narrative ends. In the case of the Hindu epics, this closure is never reached though the genre is a closed one in that sense. This paper questions the necessity of a narrative closure - is it necessary to have a resolution? If yes, is the value of the text measured based on this? He concludes his argument by considering the *Mahabharata* as, “a literary work that addresses theological, ideological and political tensions and does not force a monolithic solution”. This will be one of the areas of focus of this research.

Emma Dawson Varughese, in her article, “Seeing Shiva, Seeing Ram: Visual Representations of Deities in the Genre of Mythology-inspired Fiction, an Analysis of the Book Covers of Amish Tripathi’s Novels” discusses how Lord Shiva and Lord Rama are represented on the covers of Amish Tripathi’s works. In “Celebrate at Home: Post-millennial Indian Fiction in English and the Reception of ‘Bharati Fantasy’ in Global and Domestic Literary Markets” she discusses the importance of a body of contemporary fiction in India that draws on Hindu epics and Indian history.

Sailaja Krishnamurti, in her article, “Weaving the Story, Pulling the Strings: Hindu Mythology and Feminist Critique in Two Graphic Novels by South Asian Women”, upholds similar ideas concerning the popularity of *Amar Chitra Katha* series. She talks about the Hindu modernity reflected in such graphic representations of the epics. Krishnamurti links cultural internalization to the process of weaving. In order to do this, she brings in the traditional weaving labour women undertake. She connects it to a feminist discourse that views epics from a female perspective that stands akin to the female phase of Elaine Showalter. Her approach is not that of a feminist who rages against the derogatory portrayal of women in the epics but a cultural engagement to unravel other dimensions of the epics from a female point of view, giving rise to multiple interpretations.

In an article titled, “Welcome home, Mahabali” in *The Hindu*, the author A V Sakthidharan speaks about myths in the context of the Onam festival of Kerala. According to him, “myths are powerful carriers of the subversive feelings, protests against injustice and aspirational conjectures of subjugated people” (8). This aspect of myths is one of the concerns discussed in this chapter. He also views literature as an inevitable part of cultural production. Referring to Pierre Bourdieu’s view that cultural capital is a form of power beyond the economic form exercised through various non-economic means; the author accuses Brahminism as the reason for reversing all mechanisms of the cultural production of the original inhabitants. Re-readings and retellings were some of how the marginalized could resist the ideology of the dominant class. He says, “Literature, political fora, conversion and re-reading of religious works were used in shaping an egalitarian ideological apparatus that spawned a new consciousness among the marginalized, and challenged the iniquitous status quo” (8).

The essays in *Dramatic Revisions of Myths, Fairy Tales, and Legend* were edited by Verena. E. Foster contributes to studies of literary uses of myth by focusing on how recent dramatists have used myths, fairy tales, and legends to address contemporary concerns, significantly changing representations of women and the politics of gender relations but also topics such as damage to the environment and political violence.

From the analysis of the texts mentioned above, it is deduced that there are many studies and research on the ‘original’ epics, and there is a need to study the retellings further. The current study explores the discourse of retellings, the technique of emplotment, features of the author function and narrative function, narrative aspects like focalization, the process of narration, contemporary mythopoesis, symbolic market, and the nature of the readership. They shall be elaborated in the coming sections and chapters.

1.5. Research Method and Theoretical Framework

The research uses the critical discourse analysis method to study retellings in the genre of Indian English novels. The American scholar Zellig S Harris is said to have coined the term ‘discourse analysis’ in 1952. Discourse is the site of meaning-making according to the social, political, cultural, and historical context. The primary focus of this research method is the influence of language on social changes. In addition, connotations are more significant than denotations of language which play a crucial role in constructing social reality and its subjective understanding. The current study on the discourse of retellings adopts the discourse analysis method to study the impact of English and the novel genre as a part of colonial modernity. The translation of Sanskrit epics (supposedly the language of the upper caste) to seemingly democratic English versions is one of the significant aspects analyzed in this study. The critical discourse analysis method used in the present research focuses on the method of narration, the use of the English language, the role of authors and author function, the dominant and significant themes that sell, and the myth-making process for a particular readership.

The research is mainly based on concepts of narrative theory (focalization, story, discourse) and ideas of mythopoesis. In addition, concepts of gender studies (identity, agency, sisterhood) are used to analyze the characters in the retellings and their socio-political implications. The study is divided into two sections – structural and functional analysis of the selected texts. On the first level of analysis, the study of the characters, themes, and aspects of the novel are the primary concerns. On the second level, the politics of narration and the concept of mythopoesis for the market are discussed.

The concept of the author is essential for this study. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are said to be composed by Valmiki and Veda Vyasa, respectively. However, the identity of these authors does not go beyond the “writers” of the Indian epics. Their authorial identity is secondary to the value of these epics and myths. Similarly, the

identity of the authors of retellings is insignificant because the subject of narration and the character who focalizes the narrative is the most critical aspects of mythopoesis. Authors can only occupy the author function in the discourse of retellings. The discourse prioritizes themes, motifs, and characters over the author. Theories of Roland Barthes, Peter Brooks, Michael Foucault, and Vladimir Propp are used to analyze the making of the plot and the recurrent use of specific themes and motifs. One of the major themes discussed extensively in the retellings is the significance of female agency. Hence, some theories and concepts of gender studies were looked at.

Gender theory came into being to understand how individuals become ‘gendered’ in society and how cultural practices maintain and transmit stereotypes. The texts of Kavita Kane, Volga, and Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee are clear cases of feminist renderings of the epics. Also, the role of Shikhandi requires special mention of being the most prominent androgynous character in the epic, which is dealt with in Devdatt Pattanaik’s *Shikhandi and Other Queer Stories They Don’t Tell You* along with other stories. This chapter will focus on gender-related themes and ideas in the texts chosen for study. It will also include ideas from Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty’s text *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*. In addition, theories and ideas of feminism, gender theory, and queer theory will be brought in to analyze the characters of the texts and their role in carrying out the narration process differently from the ‘original’ ways of narration.

Hélène Cixous, Judith Butler, and Elaine Showalter are some theoreticians whose concepts helped understand the characteristic features of female characters in the retellings. For instance, Cixous’ concept of the ‘laugh’ in the essay, “Laugh of the Medusa” is relevant to study the features of the characters like Surpanakha, Mandhara, Kaikeyi, and Satyawati which are not explicitly dealt with in the ‘original’ stories. According to Cixous, the myth covered the original beauty of Medusa, whose laugh is a joy for women, but her transformed

looks instil fear in men. To take the case of Surpanakha, she is traditionally seen as a grotesque and greedy woman who lusts after Ram and Lakshman. Through such narrations, the patriarchy that remained during that age when the myths originated has hidden the tender side of Surpanakha. However, through the texts like *Lanka's Princess* and *The Liberation of Sita*, one would get to know a different side of her which are instances of the voices from the void that shake the traditional structures.

Along with the female characters, there is a need to focus on the queerness in the epics. Not only Shikhandi but there are also other queer characters in the epics that are sidelined due to several political and social reasons. One of the reasons Devdutt Pattanaik gave is the rise of monastic orders, which considered women as daughters of Mara, the demon of desire. Also, the 'Age of Enlightenment' led to the current situation of hierarchy and opposition. Another problem he mentions is the attitude of the Europeans who thought Hinduism was a false religion during the eighteenth century because of the excessive sexuality in Hinduism. The basis of this oppression or marginalization is fear, according to Pattanaik, which is also one of the main arguments in Doniger's *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*. Pattanaik says that "fear crumples our mind and narrows our view of the world as we invent predators, and create structures and hierarchies to exclude them rationally" (29), which stands akin to Cixous' idea of the fear of the 'passive other' in her essay, "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays" in the text *The Newly Born Woman*. In the *Mahabharata*, Shikhandi is destined to kill Bhishma. The celibate Bhishma has the boon of long life as he vows to abstain from worldly pleasures, especially sexual. When he encounters the transgender Shikhandi, he loses his life, substantiating Doniger's argument about the 'mare'⁵. Connecting Doniger and Cixous, it can be argued that the

⁵ "The mare suppressed and transformed is both the woman whose powers are feared by very virtue of their suppression and the erotic goddess who devours a mortal if he fails to heed to her claims upon him" (Doniger

‘passive’ Amba is transformed into the ‘mare’ Shikhandi that causes danger to Bhishma, the epitome of masculinity (as per Doniger’s idea, celibacy is closely related to the retention of sexual fluids). This association of sex with mortality is questioned in Pattanaik’s text. He explains the differences among hijras, transgenders, cross-dressers, and transexuals under the umbrella term ‘queer’. Denial of the existence of the other genders is done through “either [locating] them in the realm of the supernatural or by pointing to law books that frown queer behaviour” (13). This is one of the reasons why queerness in the epics is overlooked at times.

Another prominent motif dealt with in the discourse of retellings is the problem of class conflicts. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” talks about the problem of subalterns in the colonial context where they do not have a history and cannot speak. The case of the subaltern female is even worse. For instance, Satyawati is an unexplored character in the ‘original’ stories of the *Mahabharata*. The characterization of Satyawati in the Doordarshan *Mahabharat*, a Hindi adaptation of the epic in serial form, is that of a meek woman who ‘unintentionally’ leads to Bhishma’s vows. However, in the novel *The Fisher Queen’s Dynasty*, the story of Satyawati is that of a doubly marginalized woman as she was not ‘fragrant’ initially and was ‘born’ to a fisherman.

Since the retellings have different characters as the main protagonists in their respective texts, the study focuses on the idea of focalization (Gerard Genette), which denotes, “the perspectival restriction and orientation of narrative information relative to somebody’s perception, imagination, knowledge, or point of view” (Herman⁶ 173). It involves means of regulating, selecting, and channelling narrative information. Gerard

197). In the *Mahabharata*, Amba approaches Bhishma for marriage after being rejected by her lover but denies her wish.

⁶ Routledge *Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory*

Genette, in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, talks about three types of focalizations (zero, internal and external) as follows:

The first term [zero focalization] corresponds to what English-language criticism calls narrative with omniscient narrator and Pouillon's 'vision from behind', and which Todorov symbolizes by the formula *Narrator > Character* (where the narrator knows more than the character, or more exactly, says more than any of the characters knows). In the second term [internal focalization], *Narrator = Character* (the narrator says only what a given character knows); this is narrative with 'point of view' after Lubbock, or with 'restricted field' after Blin; Pouillon calls it 'vision with'. In the third term [external focalization], *Narrator < Character* (the narrator says less than the character knows); this is the 'objective' or 'behaviorist' narrative, what Pouillon calls 'vision from without'. (188–89)

Through this, it can be examined whether the selected retellings are subjected to specific appropriation for a purpose.

According to Jonathan Culler⁷, there is a need for a clear understanding of the distinction between story and discourse. For him, a story is, "a sequence of actions or events conceived as independent of their manifestations in discourse," and discourse is, "the discursive or the narration of events" (23). This clearly shows that story and narrative are not synonyms and cannot be used interchangeably. So, the texts chosen for study are not seen as innocent stories as 'art for arts' sake' but as narratives laden with well-wrought propaganda (both the 'original' and the retellings have their propaganda either for the general moral and social concerns or the market). Thus, the narration of epics in a different form, like the novel, has its dissemination strategies.

⁷ *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*

Epics are connected to history, and there is a need to address the problem of historical discourse and the *narrativization* of the same (that is, to impose the form of a story to reality). The etymology of *itihasa* (as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are considered as *itihasas* in the Indian cultural context) suggests its meaning as ‘so it indeed was’, vaguely translated as ‘history’. Epics are narrativized discourses that can be called history because of the moralizing tendencies it upholds. In the essay, ‘The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality’, Hayden White says that, “every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose - the desire to moralize the events of which it treats” (18). Any narrative has this impulse to moralize reality. At the same time, if a narrative is to be called historical, the events must undergo at least two narrations of their occurrence which establishes the importance of retellings. White says,

Unless at least two versions of the same set of events can be imagined, there is no reason for the historian to take upon himself the authority to give the true account of what happened. The authority of the historical narrative is the authority of reality itself; the historical account endows this reality with form and thereby makes it desirable, imposing upon its processes the formal coherency that only stories possess. (23)

The question is whether the retellings can fulfil this idea of historical narratives. At this point, explaining the concepts of plot and plotting is necessary.

Peter Brooks⁸ explains plot as, “the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent meaning and the principle by which a narrative organizes the relationship between story and discourse and for the plotting is that which makes a plot move forward” (37). The plots of the texts taken for study have similar intentions, but the question is whether the meaning intended is achieved. Here, it is

⁸ *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*

appropriate to mention Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction and the interplay of signs that destabilizes meanings (*différance*). This is where the significance of retelling the epics comes because these texts deconstruct the current epic form and some of its 'original' plots to interfere with their historicity and the associated discourse.

Michael Foucault's idea of discourse should be mentioned here. According to him, telling stories is a strategy for ordering the world's flow of discourse. Mikhael Bakhtin distinguishes between epic and novel in *The Dialogic Imagination* - when the epic portrays, "an 'absolute past' cut off from the present" in the novel, "the representation of events occur at a temporal level and within a scheme of cultural values implicating both author and reader" (Herman 64). In order to trace the difference between epic and novel, Mikhail M Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* was consulted. According to him, the novel is the only genre that provides scope for development. Epic and similar 'antique' genres are very rigid, and any development on them would be limited - "[Epic] has developed its canon that operates in literature as an authentic historical force" (321). He explains that the novel existed outside the 'high' literature during the classical Greek period and the neoclassical period. However, now its importance is inevitable, especially in exposing the inadequacy of literary theory, which "works confidently and precisely with other genres that are finished and preserve their rigidity" (324). According to him, the novel as a genre promises a future compared to the ancient literature that upholds memory which, "serves as the source and power for the creative impulse" (325). Thus, the importance of discussing the novel as a genre can be established.

Adaptation theory is also considered in the study, even though the study is not entirely focussing on adaptation as such⁹. The retellings of Indian epics taken for the study are

⁹ Daniel Dercksen, in an article titled 'The Art of Adaptation' talks about the nature of book-to-film adaptation like this: "the trick of adaptation is to find what still works and find a way to update what no longer does. A

intergeneric, from the original *shloka* format to the prose fiction form. They are not ‘intermedia’ retellings in the sense of adaptation theory most contemporarily used. A few adaptation theorists and their ideas are considered for a general understanding.

According to Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, adaptations are not autonomous works but “deliberate, announced, and extended revisitations of prior works” (xvi).

Adaptation is both a product and a process of creation and reception. Julie

Sanders’ *Adaptation and Appropriation* argues that from the simple adaptation of a text into film, theatre, or a new literary work to the more complex appropriation of style or meaning, it is arguable that all texts are somehow connected to a network of existing texts and art forms (Preface). The core idea discussed in the thesis is the relationship between mythopoesis and the market. Theories of Harry Slochower, Joseph Campbell, Pierre Bourdieu, and Hayden White are used to study this relationship.

A detailed examination of the retellings concerning the theorists and concepts mentioned in this section is done in the three core chapters.

1.6. Chapter Plan

The thesis comprises three core chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion.

1.6.1. Chapter Two: Authors and Themes

The thesis looks at the structural and functional aspects of myths. This chapter is a combination of both aspects. It looks at themes that sell and the author’s function that needs to be occupied to be branded. The approaches of Vladimir Propp and Claude Levi-Strauss are significant, as mentioned in the introduction of *The Morphology of Folktales* by Alan Dundes:

book is a book. An article [is] an article. An adaptation is always an original screenplay” (writingstudio.com). Thus, it must be deduced that there is a need to shed obsolete notions perpetuated through literature and pave the way for newer ideas which is why certain myths are recreated through the retellings of epics in different forms.

One of the most important differences in emphasis between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic brands of structural analysis has been the concern or lack of concern with context. Propp's syntagmatic approach has unfortunately dealt with the structure of text alone, just as literary folklorists generally have considered the text in isolation from its social and cultural context. In this sense, pure formalistic structural analysis is probably every bit as sterile as motif-hunting and word-counting. In contrast, Levi-Strauss has bravely attempted to relate the paradigm(s) he, "finds" in myth to the world at large, that is, to other aspects of culture such as cosmology and world view. It is in this light that Levi-Strauss' approach has helped lead to the new notion of myth (and other forms of folklore) as models. (xii-xiii)

Due to the arrival of umpteen numbers of retellings, the traditional way of looking at characters is slowly changing (at least through the authors retelling their stories). For example, Bhima in *Bhima: Lone Warrior* by M T Vasudevan Nair is revealed to have a lower class/caste identity (not that of royal birth) as Kunti reveals his father to be an unknown tribal (which might be the reason why he is the, "second" or "the other" in the entire narrative in association with the central characters in the narrative). As a result, he goes against the rules of *swargarohana* by choosing to be a human being with compassion as he helps Draupadi, who fell first in the journey and also vanishes in the forest recognizing his tribal identity as his 'being-in-the-world'. Similarly, Kaikeyi as a prodigal woman¹⁰ and a noble princess, Renuka Devi as an unchaste wife and a self-made artist, and Urmila as a naïve wife and a woman with intellect are some of the conflicting images that will be dealt in this chapter. Studying their social and cultural impacts can be saved for the future research.

1.6.2. Chapter Three: Narrative and Narration

¹⁰ In the essay titled 'Sita, Surpanakha and Kaikeyi as Political Bodies: Representations of Female Sexuality in Idealized Culture', Sara Austen identifies a new archetype called the 'prodigal woman' regarding Kaikeyi. The term denotes deviations from the expected norms to be followed by women. For example, Kaikeyi wears green clothes despite being a widow in the graphic novel *Ramayana 3392 AD*.

In the preface to *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology*, Paula Richman says that even Valmiki's *Ramayana*, "depicts controversies in which characters disagree, and modern retellings continue that tradition" (xiii). Characters are seen as debating issues of gender, politics, and class conflicts in the discourse of retellings. Through the narrative technique of focalization, characters are placed in a particular way to convey specific ideas. Focalization is one of the critical concepts of narrative theory used for the study. It is a mode of selection and restriction of the information conveyed by a narrative. It is, "the perspectival restriction and orientation of narrative information relative to somebody's perception, imagination, knowledge or point of view" (Herman 173). Most of the texts taken for the study fall under the category of internal focalization, that is, "restricted to the point of view, perception and cognition of a focal character" (Herman 174). For instance, *Bhima: Lone Warrior* is an example of fixed focalization, a subcategory of internal focalization. Here, the presentation of events is restricted to the point of view of a single character, Bhima. Through him, the reader learns about the intricacies of the character of Kunti, who is not just a motherly figure but also a clever queen who knows how to maintain harmony between her children. Draupadi being shared by the Pandavas is a part of her cleverness. Similarly, in the text, *Karna's Wife*, Uruvi is the focal character who exposes the intricacies of the characters of Karna, Kunti, and Draupadi. For example, she notices Draupadi's looks at Karna, revealing that she loves him. If the entire corpus of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* retellings were taken for the study, one would find multiple points of view on the 'original' versions of the stories. For example, the first three novels from Amish Tripathi's *Ramchandra Series*, namely *Scion of Ikshvaku*, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, and *Raavan: The Enemy of Aryavarta*, are narrated from the points of view of Ram, Sita, and Raavan, respectively looking at the concept of power differently.

1.6.3. Chapter Four: Mythopoesis and Market

Myths created through narratives have timeless significance. In his text, *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell says that, “myths are so intimately bound to the culture, time and place that unless the symbols, metaphors, are kept alive by constant recreation through the arts; life just slips away from them” (50). The shift from the epic to novel format, inculcating many thematic concerns and focalized characters, would open new horizons of interpretation that ensure the afterlife of the stories. This afterlife is ensured through constant mythopoesis. The term ‘mythopoeia’ as artificial or created mythology by a fiction writer was first used by J. R. R. Tolkien in the 1930s in his poem, “Mythopoeia”, where he explains and defends creative myth-making. In the essay, “Mythopoesis in the Modern World” by M Alan Kozlev, mythopoesis transforms banal storytelling into a spiritual endeavour and may lead to self-initiation. At the same time, myth is never devoid of socio-cultural influences because it, “operates on the collective level of cultures, societies, religions and worldview as a whole” (12). Social changes and the beginning of modernity made old myths absurd or too rigid, which led to stifling religious literalism. As a result, there is a need to reinvent and retell the ideas of the sacred according to the needs of the time. The same idea is put forth by Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myths* when he discusses the importance of shamans (ancient myth poets) who are inspired by the spiritual awakening and are destined to pass on the knowledge to the people. Along with the spiritual, social, and political necessity of mythopoesis, the need for the revival of creativity is to be looked at.

Harry Slochower’s *Mythopoesis: Mythic Patterns in the Literary Classics* is a comparative study of existing myths and their mythopoesis in modern times. To the question of the significance of mythopoesis, he says that, “while mythology presents its stories as if they actually took place, mythopoesis transposes them to a symbolic meaning... [mythopoesis helps to] redeem the values of the past and present in their symbolic form, transposing their historic transitoriness into permanent promises” (15). It is achieved through

the ‘imitation’ of mythic heroes that would lead to the revival of creativity as well. A mythic hero becomes a ‘culture’ hero in mythopoesis who, “chooses his tradition, rejects the stultified in favour of the creative roots in the past” (15). Instances of cultural heroes/heroines in the Indian context would be Rama, Karna, Ravana, Sita, and Draupadi, as they are reimagined in the retellings. For example, in Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, Rama is called the *Maryada purushottama* or the ‘perfect man’ often considered synonymous with ‘divinity’ in specific contexts¹¹. In reality, the latter is ‘attributed’ to Rama. Apart from the abovementioned characters, minor characters in the ‘original’ texts are prominent in modern mythopoesis, like Surpanakha, Ahalya, Urmila, Satyawati, and Shikhandi (Amba). In contemporary mythopoesis, they might be called ‘political’ heroes/heroines as they are focal characters addressing more significant political issues such as gender inequality, the assertion of identity, recognition, and the subversion of the attributed marginalized identity. However, the significance of mythopoesis in the retellings is not restricted to these ideological aspects. Some of the retellings considered in this study belong to the best sellers’ list¹², pointing to the significance of the market. The question is whether the writers of these novels target the cultural audience or the consumers. Moreover, are both these categories the same? If so, who controls the market, and what is its relevance today?

Yuval Noah Harari, in his text *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, says that “When a thousand people believe some made-up story for one month, that is fake news. When a billion people believe it for a thousand years, that’s a religion, and we are admonished not to call it, “fake news” in order not to hurt the feelings of the faithful (or incur their wrath)”. It must be

¹¹ *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, a 13th to 15th century Sanskrit text, portrays Rama as the supreme Brahman and retells the struggles of the major characters as a spiritual quest. This trend was seen mainly during the bhakti movement. Also, *Adhyathmaramayanam Kilippattu* by Thunchaththu Ramanujan Ezhuthachan is a retold version of the Sanskrit text in the format of a ‘bird song’ (*kilippattu*). In Kerala, this text is read in the month of *Karkitaka*, considering the text auspicious, and is read in houses and temples as a part of Hindu tradition.

¹² The Shiva Trilogy was the fastest-selling book series in Indian publishing history, while the Ram Chandra Series was the second fastest-selling book series in Indian publishing history (indiatimes.com)

inferred that the contemporary myth-makers who rewrite the epics intend to resist this tendency of the rise of a 'religion' that resists any form of dissent. When mythopoesis is a constant process, there is little chance of idolization of a particularly heroic figure because there will be multiple points of view for a single narrative. The study intends to determine the extent of this resistance to idolization through the never-ending mythopoesis the selected authors undertake. Also, there is a focus on the market and the consumers. Both these aspects are dealt by Emma Dawson Varughese in two of her essays.

Emma Dawson Varughese, in her essay titled, "Seeing Shiva, Seeing Ram: Visual Representations of Deities in the Genre of Mythology-inspired Fiction, an Analysis of the Book Covers of Amish Tripathi's Novels", partly deals with this issue. In this essay, she writes about the representation of deities on the book covers, which deviates from the cultural and aesthetic traditions of seeing the deity. There is a deliberate attempt to occlude the deity preventing any religious admiration, which goes along with the thematic concerns of the texts. These texts do not view the protagonists, Shiva and Ram, as divine beings but as human beings who struggle to become revered heroes, not even as superheroes as some of the retellings do (like Ram in Ashok K Banker's *Prince of Ayodhya*, who possesses every supernatural and superhuman power that can be seen in any fantasy fiction). According to Varughese, the retellings by Amish Tripathi are not just a historical redemption of the stories of the past with timeless significance but also those which reflect 'Indianness' which points to the socio-cultural significance of retellings. She develops this idea of a new genre in the Indian literary realm with her concept of 'Bharati Fantasy' in the essay titled, "Celebrate at Home: Post-millennial Indian Fiction in English and the Reception of 'Bharati Fantasy' in Global and Domestic Literary Markets". This article deals with the economic and political concerns of writing 'Bharati fantasy' which is not only commercial fiction but also a confluence of genres. She defines 'Bharati Fantasy' as follows

It is a body of fiction that embodies the ‘unfathomable’, ‘mythic imagination’, and the ‘mystery of human nature and the universe’, and yet, it is written in English with a popular, Indian middle-class, upwardly mobile audience, with narrative plots which might be interpreted as clinging to ‘liberal humanist verities’. (352)

Thus, retellings of epics are Bharati Fantasies, which she claims are both historical fiction and fantasy. Indian English fiction dealing with mythology becomes historical fiction considering the common cultural roots shared by Indian people. At the same time, it is a fantasy for people new to this culture – the consumers in the foreign market. She also deals with the necessity of the young Indians who want to be acquainted with their culture in a simplistic way which is one of the major concerns of the author retelling epics.

In the introduction to *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, Paula Richman talks about the *Ramayana* serial telecast on Doordarshan in 1987. She says that people were so excited to see the television series that they loathed the end of the series. There were strikes to restart the serial because Doordarshan stopped the broadcast after an agreed period of one year. Many people went to the extent of idolizing the television by putting garlands on it. Romila Thapar, the well-known historian, expressed her concern over this issue saying, “When the state acts as patron of the arts, it often favours social groups that wield relatively great influence in that society” (Richman 4). According to her, the television series did not reflect the concerns of most Indians but that of the middle class and the status quo, which had a dangerous and unprecedented authority. The problem she found was that it popularised a mainstream ‘national culture’ that was appropriated by the status quo. The question is whether this status quo controls the literary market with particular propaganda.

The chapter focuses on contemporary mythopoesis paying attention to the issue of problematizing the existing narratives and how they coexist with the retellings. For example,

there is the traditional Sita, considered the epitome of suffering and endurance, and, on the other hand, in reimagined Sita, who asserts her individuality and exhibits courageous traits. Similarly, there is the demonized Surpanakha in the traditional stories and the Surpanakha who is explicit about her sexual desires. The character changes are made for the consumers in the literary market. Also, the ‘spiritual realization’ is foreseen by writers like Joseph Campbell and Harry Slochower.

1.6.4. Chapter Five: Conclusion

This section of the thesis summarises what has been done so far. The main points are concluded here, and the research findings are listed. Also, future directions for further exploration are mentioned.

Chapter Two

Authors and Themes

2.1. Introduction

Plots of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were constructed on the central theme of *dharma*. They dealt with its two aspects – strict adherence to *dharma* and the problems of its violation. The story of the *Ramayana* goes like this – Narada narrates the story of Rama to Valmiki. Valmiki meditates upon it and writes the *Ramayana* with Rama as the central character. He destroys Raavan, who abducted his wife and establishes *dharma*. The story of the *Mahabharata* is challenging to be summarised in a few sentences due to its complex plot structure and multiple narrative layers. However, it can be vaguely summarised this way – Veda Vyasa decides to compose a poem with his life in it. Ganesa writes the story for him as he narrates. The story is about the conflicts within the Kuru dynasty. The cousins Pandavas and the Kauravas fight for the throne. Krishna interferes and instigates the Kurukshetra war that defeats the Kauravas. The Pandavas leave the throne to Parikshit, their grandson, and attains heaven. The poem composed by Veda Vyasa is propagated through his disciples, one among who recites it to Janamejaya, the son of Parikshit.

Retellers take a few events from these epics and construct a plot for the discourse of retellings. Retellings form a discourse because of the changed mode of narration (epic to the novel), positioning of different characters (focalization), and emplotment with an objective. Motifs and themes are used in a particular way by authors in their narratives in the discourse of retellings. The process of emplotment, along with the use of themes and motifs, gives rise to multiple narratives leading to mythopoesis. This chapter looks at these aspects and the nature of the author's function in the discourse of retelling.

2.2. The Significance of the Author/Author Function

The 'author' in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is defined as, "the writer of a book or other work; a person whose occupation is writing books". There are multiple debates on the importance of an author figure in analyzing a literary text. Roland Barthes' famous essay, "Death of the Author" discusses the futility of considering the author to interpret a text, and proposes the significance of the reader, instead. According to him, the importance given to an author is equal to destroying a work of art because it attains closure once the author (or the authority) is defined. Writing is, in special terms, a void. Anything can happen there – "Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (142). Barthes argues that language speaks more than the author. An author should assume impersonality in writing, and it is writing that cuts across time and space. Then, the vital aspect of a text is in its destination, that is, the reader. But still, this reader is not a person existing in a particular space or time. He says, "... the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted ... the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148). Thus, the reader is also in a negative space.

In the essay, "What is an Author?" Michael Foucault discusses a similar idea of the insignificance of an author figure but the inevitability of an author's function. He rejects the author's authority as a literary text's owner and perpetrator of meanings. Like Barthes, he calls the act of writing the creation of a space where this author's position is significant. Finding a relationship between the author and a literary text is not the critic's task. Instead, he/she should, "analyze the work through its structure, its architecture, its intrinsic form, and the play of its internal relationships" (207). The author's function is essential in this context. According to Foucault, the author function has the following traits -

... (1)the author function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses; (2) it does not affect all discourses in the same way at all times and in all types of civilization; (3) it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer but, rather, by a series of specific and complex operations; (4) it does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subject-positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals. (216)

Authors occupy the author function in a particular discourse – the discourse of retellings. Therefore, the author’s identity is insignificant, except the identity of a reteller. Only the writing that they have put forth matters. The socially, politically, and culturally relevant myths are of prime importance, and not who created them. The flexibility of the author function is exemplified at its best by Indian epics whose authors have questionable identities. When retellers occupy this position, they are ‘founders of discursivity’¹³. The authors cannot claim ownership of this author function, even though they have initiated the discourse. Therefore, the symbolic sense of the ‘death’ of the author gets exemplified. They have opened an arena of possibilities. This discourse is dynamic and not static. The removal of divinity is a feature of this dynamic and non-religious discourse. The removal of divinity calls for a necessity of the author in the context of contemporary mythopoesis. However, the attribution of divinity was necessary for a particular period, like the Bhakti movement, when authors secularised myths with a secular god. As Foucault says in, “What is an Author?”–

In our civilization, it has not always been the same types of texts that have required attribution to an author. There was a time when the texts we today call, “literary” (narratives, stories, epics, tragedies, comedies) were accepted, put into circulation, and valorised without any question about the identity of their author; their anonymity

¹³ Michael Foucault's “What is an Author?” (1969)

caused no difficulties since their ancientness, whether real or imagined, was regarded as a sufficient guarantee of their status. On the other hand, those texts we now would call scientific-those dealing with cosmology and the heavens, medicine and illnesses, natural sciences and geography-were accepted in the Middle Ages, and accepted as “true” only when marked with the name of their author. (212)

However, in the context of contemporary mythopoesis in the retellings, authors try to establish a brand. They use this discourse economically¹⁴ and as instruments to propagate their ideals. Even then, the discourse they are a part of or have created has some peculiarities. Foucault says,

In our culture (and doubtless in many others), discourse was not originally a product, a thing, a kind of goods; it was essentially an act-an act placed in the bipolar field of the sacred and the profane, the licit and the illicit, the religious and the blasphemous. Historically, it was a gesture fraught with risks before becoming goods caught up in a circuit of ownership. (212)

In the context of Indian mythology retellings, authors attempt to own their products.

However, they cannot own the discourse. For example, the Rama considered ‘original’ is Valmiki’s Rama. In the Bhakti movement¹⁵, it is Kabir’s Rama. Likewise, all the characters in retellings are the respective authors. ‘Who owns?’ does not matter, but ‘What is said?’ matters. Through different characterizations, retellers initiated a discourse that questions the old problematic discourses. This chapter looks at the process of emplotment, various character functions, and themes and motifs that are part of the discourse of retellings.

2.3. Plots and Narrative Functions

¹⁴ The economic aspect of mythopoesis is dealt in detail in Chapter Four: Mythopoesis and Market

¹⁵ Rekha Pande, in the essay “The Bhakti Movement: An Interpretation”, writes – “[...] the Bhakti saints, were protesting in a loud voice against the various injustices meted out to them by society. Religion is but a part of the social milieu and has to be assessed on the basis of the need of the society at a particular point in time. The creation of a casteless, society was the need of the time and hence a clamour for the total change” (219).

A simple definition of the plot is, “the plan or scheme of a literary or dramatic work; the main events of a play, novel, film, opera, etc., considered or presented as an interrelated sequence; a storyline” (OED). The discourse of retellings has particular plot pattern and characterization. In the context of tragedy, Aristotle says that, “the plot is the soul of a tragedy” (*Poetics*). However, in the case of retellings, the plot and the character are the contributing factors in mythopoesis. Texts taken for the study are not tragedies in the classic¹⁶ sense. Most of the plots begin with a Reversal of events and end with the Recognition of the character. Aristotle defines these two crucial elements of a tragedy, also known as the anagnorisis and peripeteia, as, “Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity”, and “Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of Recognition is coincident with a Reversal of the Situation” (*Poetics*). Authors occupying the author function have to use these elements of the tragedy to create a plot containing certain features that would sell and say many things. Retellings taken for study exhibit these aspects of products that are socially, politically, and culturally relevant.

Many theorists have explained the importance of plotting and characterization¹⁷. According to Peter Brooks¹⁸, “... plotting [is] the activity of shaping, with the dynamic aspect of narrative—that which makes a plot, move forward, and makes us read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative a line of intention and a portent of design that holds the promise of progress toward meaning” (xiii). As Brooks suggests, plots take the reader to the meaning. In the retellings, the meaning that the retellers achieve is the new myth. The plot makes one

¹⁶ Aristotle’s *Poetics* discusses the peculiarities of drama, especially tragedy. He places tragedy (drama) superior to the epic.

¹⁷ Detailed discussion in Chapter Three: Narrative and Narration

¹⁸ *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*

“The fact, quality, or character of being situated in history; *esp.* historical accuracy or authenticity” (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

read forward; that is, it engages the reader. Therefore, engaging plots make the reader ‘consume’¹⁹, the literary product, the retelling. The retellers attempt to reach their product to the maximum number of consumers. Myths and their themes engage the readers because of the epics’ current popularity and historical significance.

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are known as *itihasa*²⁰ in the Indian literary tradition. The term means ‘thus it happened’²¹, pointing at the significance of these two texts as a history. Retellings of myths of these texts, too, have a historicity²² because the plots and characters explain a particular social, political, and cultural situation. Hayden White²³ explains the idea of emplotment in the context of historiography -, “Providing the meaning” of a story by identifying the kind of story that has been told is called explanation by emplotment. ...Emplotment is the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind” (7). As myths are historically significant, emplotment is crucial in analyzing the retellings.

The *Ramchandra Series* by Amish Tripathi is a multilinear narrative where, “there are many characters; and a connection brings them all together” (xvii, *Scion of Ikshvaku*). Therefore, getting closure for the texts until the series ends is not easy. The beginning of *Scion of Ikshvaku* is *in medias res*. In the first chapter, Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita are in the forest amidst their exile. Sita has been kidnapped. The subsequent chapters show flashback events from the birth of Rama leading to the episode described in the first chapter. Here, the Reversal of the Situation happens in the case of Rama when he is exiled. Later, his Recognition occurs as he realizes that he is not an incarnation of Vishnu but a part of the

¹⁹ The relevance of myths as products for consumption is detailed in Chapter Four: Mythopoesis and Market

²⁰ Radhavallabh Tripathi says that *itihasa* “presents a continuum of past, present and future. It is both descriptive and prescriptive” (87)

²¹ As mentioned in Emma Dawson Varughese’s “Seeing Shiva, Seeing Ram: Visual Representations of Deities in the Genre of Mythology-Inspired Fiction, an Analysis of the Book Covers of Amish Tripathi’s Novels”.

²² “The fact, quality, or character of being situated in history; esp. historical accuracy or authenticity” (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

²³ *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973)

Vishnu mission carried out by Sita, the next Vishnu. A female leader undertaking the Vishnu mission for one's nation and the hurdles she faces form the significant theme in *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*. The Reversal of the Situation happens along with that of Rama when she is exiled. The Recognition occurs when she realizes she is the chosen Vishnu, informed by Vishwamitra. The latter wants the destruction of Raavan, who is an unscrupulous trader. Only Sita can defeat him because she is the daughter of Vedavati, Raavan's love interest. This plot is developed in the text *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*. These three texts culminate in *The War of Lanka*. Therefore, Amish Tripathi has created a fantasy genre with mythic characters with different characteristic features. He has used cliff-hangers and the technique of hyperlink narrative to engage the reader. Also, the plot techniques like Reversal of the Situation and Recognition are used to create a dramatic effect on the story. He also alluded to the 2012 Delhi rape case in *Scion of Ikshvaku*, revealing his political stance on such socially relevant issues. Bharata, the brother of Rama, is shown as brutally killing Dhenuka, the juvenile culprit in the Roshni rape case. However, Rama is against such emotional decisions and punishments on serious social issues like this. He adheres to *dharma* and advocates for fair trials abiding by the law. Such social elements included in the plot make it readable for the contemporary readership²⁴.

The novels of Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee, Kavita Kane, Volga, and Pratibha Ray adopt a feminist emplotment. The central theme in these texts is the self-empowerment of women. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi is a major character, and the events of the *Mahabharata* are viewed from her perspective. Here, the Reversal of the Situation occurs with Draupadi's humiliation in the palace of Hastinapur. Her Recognition occurs during the Kurukshetra war, where she can see the events closely, like Sanjaya in the original story. The plot has a twist at the end, where Karna extends his hands to Draupadi after reaching heaven.

²⁴ Developed in Chapter Four: Mythopoesis and Market

Here, the plot progresses to place Draupadi initially in a position of helplessness where she has to marry five people forcefully as a pawn in her father's revenge. Later, she realizes her worth and holds Karna's hands without thinking about her husband. In this text, Draupadi realizes she is just an instrument of patriarchy that she liberates.

Similarly, in *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita's Reversal of the Situation occurs when she is forced to do the fire test to prove her chastity. Her Recognition happens when she is once again asked to do the fire test to be the queen of Ayodhya after she gives her sons to Rama. In between these two events, Sita is made to realize her strength, and she returns to the earth with dignity and not condescending to the emotional attachments like the role of a wife and that of a mother. The novel *The Liberation of Sita* begins with the Reversal of the Situation where Sita is banished to the forest for suspicious chastity. Her Recognition happens only through the shared experiences of other women in the epic, suggesting a sisterhood. Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* has Urmila recognizing the worth of knowledge and the significance of a learned self that empowers a woman to control her emotions. The Reversal of the Situation occurs in this novel, where she understands that rigid rules hinder the pursuit of one's happiness when Lakshmana goes into exile with Rama and Sita. In *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, the fictional character Uruvi recognizes that human actions decide their fate. Kunti's abandonment of Karna caused his caste discrimination; Draupadi's birth as an undesirable daughter and the dominance of her brother Dhrishtadyumna made her reject Karna and marry the Pandavas, and Karna's guilt-stricken conscience due to the killing of Abhimanyu is exposed through Uruvi.

In *Battle Beyond Kurukshetra*, Draupadi's inner self and Karna's life problems are revealed. Here, the Reversal occurs when Ashwatthama kills her children after the Kurukshetra war. The Recognition occurs after she gives up the mundanity of life. In *Ahalya's Awakening*, the Reversal occurs when Indra lusts for her. Her Recognition occurs

after Rishi Gauthama curses her. The plot is constructed to foreground some feminist ideals like sexual freedom, the right to knowledge, and liberation of the self from marriage institutions that are antagonistic to women's freedom. With Surpanakha as the central character, *Lanka's Princess* exhibits the destructive power of woman's revenge and desires. However, she is portrayed as a strong feminist character. The Reversal occurs when her husband Vidyuji is killed in a battle, and the Recognition happens in her realization of the liberating nature of self-love. In *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, Satyawati is portrayed as the progenitor of a self-destructive dynasty. She is shown to have control over most of the strong male characters like Bhishma and Shantanu. The Reversal occurs when she meets Parashar, after which she becomes sexually empowered. This power makes her the queen of Hastinapur. Recognition occurs when she has understood the power of contentment with one's strengths. In *Yajnaseni*, Draupadi's Reversal occurs when they are exiled, and the Recognition happens during the *swargarohana*. She realizes the futility of mundanity and embraces the power of the self.

Class conflicts and problems of caste are dealt with in *Bhima: Lone Warrior*. Bhima looks at Ekalavya, Hidimbi, Ghatotkacha, and himself as victims of class and caste marginalization. In his case, the Reversal happens when he rejects the throne of Hastinapur after the Kurukshetra war. The Recognition comes after his mother reveals who his father is. He recognizes his secondary position in several life phases after this revelation. A similar revelation occurs in the case of Karna in *Battle Beyond Kurukshetra*. The truth that Karna was an elder brother to the Pandavas is the beginning of the plot. This reverses Draupadi's character, and she recognizes that her unfettered anger caused a magnanimous disaster in the form of the Kurukshetra war. From the above explanations of plot techniques, it is clear that character is the key to plot movement. An analysis of the character function in terms of Vladimir Propp's ideas would explain clearly the nature of emplotment in the discourse of

retellings. Vladimir Propp adopts a syntagmatic approach to structural analysis in the text *Morphology of the Folktale*. His detailed study of Russian fairy tales identifies thirty-one narrative functions or *narratemes*. He says,

Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action. ... Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale. (21)

The narrative function helps in understanding the character focalization effectively. In addition, emplotment contributing to mythopoesis can be appropriately understood. The importance of narrative function and its role in plotting retellings will be dealt in the next section.

2.4. Recurring Themes and

Themes are “the subject[s] of discourse, discussion, conversation, meditation, or composition; a topic” (*OED*). Motifs are “a particular subject for imaginative treatment, *esp.* an incident, situation, ethical problem, etc., embodying a central idea that informs a work; a recurrent theme, subject, or image” (*OED*). They decide the course of the narrative and the subsequent discussion. Hence, analyzing themes and motifs explains the nature of retellings and what it aims at. In an article²⁵, Horst S. Daemmrich talks about the significance of reiterating themes -

Themes that recur over long periods of time retain their basic quality. It is apparent, however, that their continued vitality springs from the historic sense of authors who weave the typical pattern into a new and unique fabric:

Recurring primary themes have consistently, almost exclusively focused on human individuation. They have raised basic questions concerning personality structure, the

²⁵ "Themes and Motifs in Literature: Approaches: Trends: Definition" (1985)

possible coexistence of opposites and limits of self-knowledge, the individual and society, and the relationship of the individual to the principles governing the universe. As a result, themes have contributed to a powerful literary tradition reflecting a continuing struggle for self-realization in a fictional realm that accommodates patterns of conservation and radical change, a dialogue with the past and a vision of the future. (572-3)

Authors of retellings take the core theme of the epics and weave it into their narratives in a different fashion. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have ‘the significance of *dharma*’ as the primary theme. However, retellings deal with variants of this theme according to their understanding and perspectives about the existing social, political, and cultural conditions. Myths in the epics uphold the ‘original’ theme of establishing *dharma*. However, retellers propounding new myths deal with themes like the necessity of a hero/villain binary, female characters’ agency, sisterhood, nature versus civilization, the journey from margin to mainstream, and the changing dynamics of familial relationships. Motifs like love, forest, introspection, dreams, nightmares, and liberation are used in varied proportions to ‘plot’ a narrative with a focal character revealing the narrative. These motifs are a part of the tradition²⁶. The fundamental question put forth by authors of retellings is ‘What is *dharma* today?’ The discourse is formed based on two thoughts – the *dharma* of an individual and the *dharma* towards the self. Writers create narratives with multiple combinations of various subthemes and motifs, contributing to this more prominent theme of *dharma*. The question is why it is done. As Stith Thompson says in the text *The Folktale*,
The same tale types and narrative motifs are found scattered over the world in most puzzling fashion. A recognition of these resemblances and an attempt to account for

²⁶ Stith Thompson's *The Folktale* (1946)

them brings the scholar closer to an understanding of the nature of human culture. He must continually ask himself, “Why do some peoples borrow tales and some lend? How does the tale serve the needs of the social group?” (6)

Thompson’s view on understanding the patterns of narrative motifs and themes is relevant to this study of retellings. Authors have used the original epics’ stories, characters, and events to create a new narrative for contemporary society. In this way, they have personalized the myths for a larger political context and objective. The subsequent chapters will discuss the methods by which they create these narratives and their aims and objectives.

2.4.1 The Necessity of Binaries

Novels taken for this study have a protagonist who either tells the story or whose story is told. The protagonist becomes a hero/heroine in a myth when he/she has done something that inspires society. Joseph Campbell²⁷ talks about the heroes/heroines of popular fiction - “... a hero or heroine [is someone] who has found or done something beyond the normal range of achievement and experience. A hero is someone who has given his/her life to something bigger than oneself” (Ch. 5). The point to be noted here is that the heroes/heroines are not devoid of human follies and tragic flaws. In the retellings selected for this research, they are characters with human attributes. It is observed that heroes/heroines are not exempted from the tests of life in the respective novels. He/she has an opponent in most cases. For example, in the novel *Scion of Ikshvaku*, Rama has Raavan as his opponent.

In *Scion of Ikshvaku*, Raavan declares war with Mithila, and Rama has to use the *asurastra*, a restricted weapon by the previous Rudra²⁸. This causes his exile and not Kaikeyi’s boon. Here, Raavan occupies the narrative functions of

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ Rudra is the primary character in *The Shiva Trilogy* by Amish Tripathi. *Ramchandra Series* is a continuation of that series.

*reconnaissance*²⁹ and *villain*³⁰. Later, his siblings, Surpanakha and Vibhishan, are sent to attack and kidnap Sita during their exile. Here, the narrative function is *trickery*³¹. In this novel, these three narrative functions establish Raavan as the antagonist. Also, some of the events assert Raavan as the villain. For example, Dasharath notices Raavan's pendant, made of human bones – “Dashrath stared in disbelief. He had heard of demons that drank blood and wine from the skulls of their enemies and even kept their body parts as trophies. But here was a warrior who wore the relics of his enemy! *Who is this monster?*” (14). However, in the novel *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*, Vedavati (Raavan's love interest) says, “What you term a monster is the fire every successful man has within him” (174). Thus, it can be seen that the hero/villain binary slightly gets blurred in this text where Raavan is the protagonist. Still, the binary is essential for the plot movement in *Scion of Ikshvaku*.

Not only for Dashrath, but Raavan was also the villain for Rama. Their conflict begins at Rama's birth itself. Dashrath's wrath towards Rama is because of his defeat in the battle with Raavan – “He hated Raavan viscerally. Not only had the Lankan devastated Ayodhya, he had also ruined Ram's future. His birth was permanently associated with the ‘taint’ of Raavan's victory. No matter what he did, Ram would always remain inauspicious for his father and the people of Ayodhya” (67).

The hero/villain binary between Rama and Raavan is evident in their understanding of love. According to Rama, love equals respect for the woman. However, Raavan's love is an uncontrolled emotion that culminates in wrath in *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*. Rama says in *Scion of Ikshvaku* – “Love is secondary. It's not important. I want someone whom I can respect ... A relationship is not just for fun, it is also about trust and the knowledge that you

²⁹ “the villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance” (Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*)

³⁰ “the villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family” (V. Propp)

³¹ “the villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or of his belongings” (V. Propp)

can depend on your partner. Relationships based on passion and excitement do not last” (79). However, Raavan disrespectfully kidnaps Sita.

In *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*, the villainy of Raavan is justified. Here, the narrative function of *villainy* is occupied by a robber named Sukarma, who kills Vedavati. *Punishment*³² is not fulfilled only by killing Sukarma, but the whole villagers –

Continuing to look down, Raavan ordered in a low growl, ‘Kill them all.’ Then he pointed to where Sukarman and his gang were tied up. ‘Except them.’ The villagers scattered and ran screaming in all directions as Raavan’s soldiers rushed to obey their lord’s command. The residents of Todee did not stand a chance. Every one of them was killed. (187)

However, in *Lanka’s Princess*, Vedavati hated him and cursed him before jumping into the fire – “I am Vishnu’s and shall be reborn as his wife and the reason for your death, Ravan!” (86). Surpanakha found it an opportunity to overpower her brother later in the text. In both texts, Vedavati is one of the reasons for Raavan’s end but in different ways.

The difference between Rama and Raavan is that the former adheres to *dharma* and seeks lawful ways to defeat Raavan. On the other hand, the latter succumbs to his anger and vengeance. This establishes the hero/villain binary. The necessity of this binary is also a political one, as mentioned at the beginning of the novel *Scion of Ikshvaku* – “You live in Ram’s kingdom, hold your head high. Fight for justice. Treat all as equal. Protect the weak. Know that dharma is above all. Hold your head high, You live in the kingdom of Ram” (xi). If Rama is said to be the king of the people, Raavan is portrayed as selfish. The novel *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta* begins – “I am Raavan. I want it all. I want fame. I want power. I want wealth. I want complete triumph. Even if my Glory walks side by side with my Sorrow” (xi).

³² “the villain is punished” (V. Propp)

Rama is portrayed as a lawful man, whereas Raavan is unscrupulous. However, this binary is not rigid in some of the novels based on the *Ramayana*.

In *Lanka's Princess*, Raavan is shown as a noble king who has erased the class conflicts in Lanka –

Ravan had truly made Lanka the golden city, percolating the wealth to all its subjects. Lanka, the golden city, percolating the wealth to all its subjects. Another reason for Ravan's popularity was that he had done what others before him had never attempted before: he had changed the social life of the city where earlier there had been no contact between the classes. Now the poorest could meet the King any time and the vice versa. (82)

Therefore, there is only a subtle difference between Rama and Raavan, the latter's hubris.

2.4.2. The Fragile Familial Bonds

In *Battle Beyond Kurukshetra*, Yudhishtira curses Kunti after realizing Karna is his elder brother. The irony is that Yudhishtira does not mourn for his other relatives but only for Karna. He decides to live in the forest as a punishment for the sin of fratricide. His brothers question him about his deeds – “If you had said that a life in the forest begging for alms was enough for us, I would have gladly done it for you. Without saying it then, why were you eager for war? Oh brother, if only you had shown this wisdom before the war, all our kinfolk who died would have been saved!” (19). Compared to Lakshmana's dedication to Rama, the brothers question Yudhishtira for his actions in the name of *dharma*. Also, Arjuna attempts to behead Yudhishtira for hurting his ego -

The day Arjuna attempted to behead Yudhishtira, the day Arjuna was abused as a coward for failing to kill their brother Karna! It was the same day that Arjuna finally killed him, and, seeing the beheaded corpse of that elder brother, the younger

Yudhishtira danced around drunk with happiness! Yes, it was the cursed day when earth was gripped by the passion for fratricide. (149)

She begins to feel for Karna. When Yudhishtira blames Arjuna for not killing Karna, she realizes that Karna is far better than her husband. Also, she feels for Karna and places her emotions inferior to his. She wished she was a widow like the other women in Hastinapur – “Their prayer has an aim, a clear, precise, and glowing aim. She realized that even widowhood was not possible for her. *You never had fulfillment in marriage in spite of five husbands. In the same way, you cannot become a widow either*” (161).

The husband-wife relationship is also strained in *Battle Beyond Kurukshetra*. She realizes that she is not loved -

Love for her also did not hinder their devotion to their elder brother. When Yudhishtira asked, she demanded that the scoundrel be put to death. Not that she now regretted that they let him live. But how could she escape the realization that her husbands’ love for her was never blind at any point?

Draupadi, were you ever loved for your own sake? (69)

In *The Forest of Enchantment*, Sita also realizes that Rama’s love for her is conditional. Only if she proves her chastity will she be made the queen of Ayodhya. Even Lakshmana prefers Rama over his wife, Urmila. In the second chapter, “Music of the Earth” in *The Liberation of Sita*, Sita remembers an instant from the past when she hears about Ahalya from Rama. He describes Ahalya as a woman with no character – “Sage Vishwamitra interrupted [...], told me her story. My heart turned bitter. I was sad to know that there was no character behind that beauty” (19). Sita is attracted to Ahalya, which means, “land untouched by a plough”. Since Sita’s birth is also from Earth, she identifies with Ahalya leading to the sisterhood between them later. In a focalized narrative instant, Sita’s sisterhood with Ahalya is exemplified – “She did not know why, whenever someone called her the daughter of Earth,

she thought of Ahalya” (23). Even Ahalya’s character is shown to be establishing a sisterhood with Sita – “She was surprised at her own willingness to share her story with Sita. Why did she feel this bond of sisterhood with her?” (25). However, Sita was unwilling to understand Ahalya’s philosophy in the beginning. An excerpt from their conversation shows the confusion Sita instills in her mind during her self-realization process:

‘My husband is not such a person. He will enquire into truth and untruth’.

‘But he does enquire, doesn’t he?’ Ahalya said sarcastically’.

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning... What does conducting an enquiry imply, Sita? Distrust, isn’t it?’

‘Wouldn’t it be better, instead, to believe in either your innocence or guilt?’ (26)

Sita cannot process the subtlety of Ahalya’s explanation of a man’s love. She emotionally speaks to Ahalya, “Rama’s love for me, my love for Rama is a truth. There is no untruth in it. All the wisdom you’ve earned will get washed away in the face of that truth” (27). She realizes only later the meaning of Ahalya’s words. When Lakshmana informs Sita about her chastity test ordered by Rama, she remembers everything Ahalya said. Her realization is completed after she is banished from Ayodhya. This leads to her liberation in the end. Ahalya once again advises Sita, and unlike before, the pain of experience makes her realize the depth of her words -

Till you take decisions for Rama’s sake and not yours, your decision to go through the chastity test will continue to pursue you, Sita. Look at yourself. You are enduring great pain. You think you are enduring it for the sake of someone else. You think that you have performed your duty for the sake of someone else. Your courage, your self-confidence...you have surrendered everything to others. What have you saved for yourself? (36)

Ahalya's influence on Sita is evident towards the end of this chapter, where Sita asserts her decision not to return to Ayodhya. The role of a wife and a mother no longer excites Sita, and she asserts her identity as the daughter of the earth – "By refusing to bow down to external authority, Sita had fully experienced, for the first time, the inner power of self-authority" (38). A similar assertion and realization can be seen in *The Forest of Enchantments*.

In *Lanka's Princess*, Surpanakha was subordinate to her brothers. Her father, Vishravas, loved Vibhishan because he was interested to learn the Vedas. However, her mother, Kaikesi, liked Raavan and Kumbhakarna because they could fulfill her dreams by learning weaponry. Due to this, Surpanakha is quickly consumed by anger and vengeance after a massive loss in her life. She is portrayed as a *false hero*³³ as she is the sister but plots against the brother. In her story, Raavan fulfills the function of *villainy*. They are positioned as antagonistic to each other in the plot – "Ravan, as always, ignored her, barely aware that she existed, busy with either his studies or his adventurous exploits. He barely tolerated her, sweeping her with an impatient look whenever she was near" (11). Her revenge motivates her to plot against her brother. She instigates the war between Rama and Raavan. Her character is responsible for the *struggle*³⁴ in the novel. She describes Sita's beauty and manipulates her brother to kidnap her. The function *delivery*³⁵ is found here. Thus, the sibling bonding in this text is weak, which is shown as the main reason for Raavan's downfall because of Surpanakha.

In *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*, a similar fragile familial relationship exists. Raavan's father hates Raavan, suspecting his low birth (as a Naga). Nevertheless, this hatred does not change at all. In *Scion of Ikshvaku*, the father-son relationship gets better later. Raavan's superiority over all his family members is evident in *Raavan: Enemy of*

³³ *Morphology of the Folktale* by Vladimir Propp

³⁴ "the hero and the villain join in direct combat" (V. Propp)

³⁵ "the villain receives information about his victim" (V. Propp)

Aryavarta. He does not even obey his uncle Mareech and keeps a distance from his mother; once he becomes a successful trader –

Mareech looked at his sister in surprise. He didn't know that she had already acquiesced to Raavan's demand. The look on Kaikesi's face was a mixture of helplessness and resignation. Many years later, Mareech would remember this as the first of many surrenders. The moment when his relationship with Raavan changed.

(74)

2.4.3. The Significance of Female Agency

The narrative of *The Liberation of Sita* moves forward so that Sita returns to her state of birth, that is, the return to earth. In this novel, Sita is on a return journey but realizes and acknowledges her true self through other women in the epic. She shares a sisterhood with Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka Devi, and Urmila. Bell Hooks, in her deconstructive essay, "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women," written on the idea of sisterhood, says –

Women who are exploited and oppressed daily cannot afford to relinquish the belief that they exercise some measure of control, however relative, over their lives. They cannot afford to see themselves solely as 'victims' because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess. It would be psychologically demoralizing for these women to bond with other women on the basis of shared victimization. They bond with other women on the basis of shared strengths and resources. This is the woman bonding feminist movement should encourage. It is this type of bonding that is the essence of Sisterhood. (128)

In the retellings, women characters no longer appear as victims. They are shown as liberating/liberated women recognizing their true selves. In this text, Sita liberates herself from the sufferings of patriarchy through these four characters. Similar instances of sisterhood can be seen in other retellings as well. Bell Hooks talks about reclaiming feminine

identity by identifying female consciousness. There should be political solidarity among women which she calls sisterhood – “Before we can resist male domination, we must break our attachment to sexism; we must work to transform female consciousness. Working together to expose, examine and eliminate sexist socialization within ourselves, women would strengthen and affirm one another and build a solid foundation for developing political solidarity” (129). She also says, “To experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood” (138). This political solidarity is evident in *The Liberation of Sita*, where the four women indirectly help Sita solve her problem with patriarchy. They talk to her about the strength of inner beauty, the value of trust in a relationship, the unwanted obsession with a woman’s chastity, and the spiritual reclamation of one’s self and identity. Finally, she redeems herself when she abandons the identity of Rama’s wife and returns to her mother. A trajectory of inspiration/influence could be traced in this text – “She had learned what she could from their [Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka Devi, and Urmila] experiences. At first, she felt only disdain and anger for them. Later, when she understood that the anguish in their lives was similar, she felt a camaraderie, a companionship with them” (57).

The first chapter is titled, “The Reunion”. Surpanakha is the central character in the narrative. After Sita’s banishment, Sita, Lava, and Kusha are in the forest. Sita waits for her children anxiously in this chapter. She is shown as a mother living for her children. Sita has not yet realized her inner strength; instead, her mind is chaos-inflicted and in pain. Sita begins to identify with Surpanakha. She says, “No man will ever love her. The man who loved me abandoned me. Have the two stories become one?” (9). This is the beginning of Sita recognizing the self and identity – she is a woman devoid of love and a mere political tool in the hand of the man she loved. Afterward, she listens to Surpanakha’s philosophy about inner beauty and the futility of external beauty. Surpanakha has embraced a new identity in this

text. She lives with a man named Sudhira. She has a friendly conversation with Sita.

Surpanakha renounced her beliefs about ideal beauty and attained a stoic nature, and she is portrayed as a successful woman. Sita, on the other hand, finds satisfaction in raising her sons. She has not come out of the stereotypical roles ultimately. She says, “Yes. I’m Rama’s wife. As the queen, I couldn’t discharge my duties. I must at least give to Ramarajya its heirs” (15). However, Surpanakha points at the futility of this belief – “You never lived in that kingdom, yet see how your life is entangled in it, Sita!” (15). Sita’s realization begins at the juncture.

Sita begins to assert her identity gradually. She stops Surpanakha from describing Sita as Rama’s wife. Instead, she says, “I am Sita. I am Janaka’s daughter, Janaki. I am the daughter of Mother Earth”(11). Here, Sita has abandoned her married identity and embraced the one before that. However, she still identifies herself as the daughter of her parents. This text reveals how Sita becomes just Sita without any bondage of stereotypical roles of a daughter, wife, and mother.

Rama exercises his power over Sita when he stops her from asking and knowing more about Ahalya – “Sita, you’re still very young. You won’t understand. You shouldn’t even hear such things or talk about them” (76). This benevolent sexist statement views women as inferior to men and fragile, that they need to be protected by men in any manner. Sita does not question him at that moment; instead, he gets carried away by his love. No matter how much ever Sita asks Rama about Ahalya, he is unwilling to explain why he saw no character in Ahalya. Rama’s inconsiderate attitude towards women and his strict adherence to *dharma* is criticized. He even approves Parasurama’s act of nearly killing Renuka Devi, the latter’s mother, upon his father’s order. Rama says, “That was on his father’s order. What could he have done? Is there a higher dharma than carrying out the wishes of one’s father?” (42).

Urmila is the last character in this narrative that completes her journey. The change in Urmila shocks Sita. If the denial was the initial response to Ahalya's and Renuka Devi's life accounts, then awe/shock is the first response to Urmila's change. These peaks of emotions guide Sita on her path to liberation.

The text shows an episode during their fourteen-year exile when Sita meets Ahalya coincidentally. Sita's initial response to Ahalya was a pity because of the, "injustice" Ahalya faced. However, Ahalya rejects the idea of injustice and tells Sita that truth and untruth are subjective. The question is not about a woman cheated by a man in disguise but whether she knew it was her husband and deliberately slept with another man. She says -

Did I see through his disguise? That is the question that bothers many people in this world. But to my husband, the question was irrelevant. It was the same to him either way. His property, even if temporarily, had fallen into the hands of another. It was polluted. Pollution cleanliness, purity, impurity, honour, dishonour – Brahmin men have invested these words with such power that there is no scope in them for truth and untruth. No distinction. (25)

Here, Ahalya criticizes the view that women are properties of men. The 'defilement' of his property made Sage Gauthama curse Ahalya³⁶. Ahalya is glad she was cursed because she believes she has gained much wisdom. She believes that it was Sage Gauthama's loss to have abandoned her for what society expects from him. In due course, all these exchanges between Sita and Ahalya help her redeem herself from the stereotypes.

Kausalya, Rama's mother, is seen as normalizing this view about a woman. In the text, Kausalya is shown as believing in patriarchy. When Sita asks her about Ahalya, Kausalya's words normalize the objectification of women – "What is there to tell, child. As

³⁶ A detailed description of this incident from another point of view can be seen in *Ahalya's Awakening*.

you know, men consider women objects of enjoyment” (21). Here, Kausalya describes the story of Ahalya to Sita and immediately regrets it. She is not blaming Indra for his act. Instead, she blames Ahalya’s fate as the main culprit. Like Rama, she also makes a benevolent sexist comment: “You are still a child. I made a mistake by telling you all these things. Whatever is written in one’s fate will happen. There is nothing we can do. No one can change one’s fate... Forget about that ill-fated woman” (21). A similar characterization of Kausalya can be seen in *Sita’s Sister*.

The third chapter in *The Liberation of Sita* is named, “The Sand Pot”. The name is a metaphor for marriage. Renuka Devi inspires Sita to liberate herself from society’s expectations. Renuka Devi questions the unwanted importance bestowed upon a woman’s *paativratyam* (chastity). The sand pot is an occasional product she makes to remind herself about the fragility of chastity. She gifts one to Sita, indirectly conveying this idea to her so that she can prepare herself for the future. She has begun to believe only in one’s creativity and not those imposed by society. She says,

A good pot is a product of many things – practice, concentration, sand, the right amount of water and so on. Sage Jamadagni was a man of great wisdom, yet he did not understand such a simple truth. But such is the wisdom of these spiritual seekers. No matter how much wisdom they earn through penance, they continue to have a dogmatic view on the *paativratyam* of their wives. (46)

Sita initially disagrees with many of Renuka Devi’s ideas about the fragility of the marriage bond. However, she realizes it later when her children question her about their father. They were eager to know about him, and their curiosity hints at the dominance of the father figure

The children were pining for their father. They were dreaming about him. Though she had brought them up like they were her very life, though they knew nothing about

their father, though their father did not even know about their birth or growing up – they wanted him. Sons needed to grow up inheriting their father’s name. (53)

Later in the text, Lava and Kusha disapprove of Sita for not respecting their father’s wish – “How nice it would have been had she come to the court once and proved her innocence as their father desired! It would have been so good for them. A thin flame burned in their young hearts” (58). However, in the final chapter of *The Liberation of Sita* titled, “The Shackled”, Rama is portrayed as a vulnerable character. The author attempts to establish that a man is emotionally unstable without a woman, but a woman needs to recognize the potential of the self and identity to live. Rama laments after he banishes Sita because he is bound by law – “She is strong and able woman. She will give birth to a good son and fully enjoy the pleasures of bringing him up. I am the one who is weak and incapable. My exalted nobleness is my handicap. With this political power over myself, I have lost my Sita. I have lost my son” (77). Interestingly, any gender is bound by many laws, rules, codes, and morality fixed by society. In this narrative, Ram is unable to break the stereotype of a king, but Sita is redeemed from the restrictive norms of society. When women in this text forsook men from their lives, Rama needed Sita to liberate him – “But by giving him his sons, Sita had cleared the way for his liberation. She had always stood by him. She had always protected him. In Ayodhya, everyone swore by Rama’s protection. Who knew that Sita was Sri Rama’s protective charm?” (85).

The trajectory of Urmila’s development is similar to other female characters. It begins with rage, and then it subsides, ending in wisdom – “When I began, it was, indeed, wrath. But gradually it turned into a quest for truth – within me and with myself ... I desired solitude. Not loneliness, solitude. The solitude in which I could converse within and myself” (66). Urmila asserts that her relationship with Lakshmana will be determined by how Lakshmana

takes her change. She is asserting that she will no longer fit into the expectations of patriarchy, and she is adamant in her decision -

‘Change is the sign of life. The course of our future depends on the value he attaches to that change’.

‘I’ve acquired the wisdom to ask questions not out of hatred but for the sake of justice’.

‘My relationship with Lakshmana will depend on whether he understands my wisdom and how much he respects it’ (67)

Sita rejects Rama’s request to return to Ayodhya, inspired by Urmila. This is an instance of the influence of sisterhood. Sita recognizes her power of herself through Urmila

Power is the root cause of all sorrow, Akka. Do you know another strange thing? We must acquire this power. And then give it up. I shall not submit to anyone’s power.

Nor will I bind anyone with my power. Then I will feel I have liberated myself. I will feel only joy within myself! Great peace! Much love! Compassion for all! (68)

It must be noted that the women characters in this novel had to face different forms of injustice. The first reaction by everyone was rage and wrath. Later, they channel their feelings into building their self. They create a space for themselves – Surpanakha builds a garden, Ahalya makes her curse a boon to gain wisdom, Renuka Devi invests in her creativity and art, and Urmila undergoes a self-imposed exile in a room for fourteen years. They realize their self-worth gradually. Sita, too, liberates herself and understands the power of free will and individuality inspired by these four women. Sita is redeemed through sisterhood.

Mothers are also significant figures in the lives of female characters in the epic retellings. In *Lanka’s Princess*, Surpanakha’s mother, Kaikesi, wishes to marry Rishi Vishravas to beget good progeny. Surpanakha is an undesirable child for her mother. Kaikesi is an ambitious woman, and Surpanakha is a misfit for her dream – “She needed sons to

consolidate what she had dreamt of: an asura empire with her sons as the rulers of the three worlds; and Lanka, their lost golden city as their capital” (1). Surpanakha resists every attempt of her mother to subject her to patriarchy. Surpanakha was named Meenakshi by Vishravas and Chandranakha by Kaikesi. The reason why she is Surpanakha shows that she is a rebel against patriarchy –

‘Why can you not behave like a girl? Always fighting and squabbling, hitting boys and throwing stones and scratching the eyes out of anyone who provokes you.

Surpanakha, that’s the right name for you, you monster!’

‘Yes, I am a monster!’ screeched Meenakshi, her eyes flashing, baring her claws at her mother. ‘See them? If anyone hurts me, I shall hurt them with these!! I am Surpanakha!’ (9)

Only Taraka, Surpanakha’s grandmother, realizes her worth. Taraka is portrayed as a strong woman in this text. She is a magician, and Surpanakha wishes to learn magic from her, which her father denies. She laments Kaikesi’s inability to recognize Surpanakha’s worth. Taraka asserts her belief in a god different from that of Vishravas, who looks down upon the asuras – “Yes, in our God, who is fair, not differentiating between rishis and Kshatriyas, daityas and devas, asuras and adityas, caste and colour, creed and country. Your God did that and created a division not with all people but amongst Gods too!” (14-5). Through the character of Taraka, the discriminations in the established religious system are questioned.

Surpanakha questions Raavan’s double standards in one of the episodes in the same text. She makes love to Vidyujaiva, angers her brothers, and rebels against them – “You have been so busy with your women and your own wedding that you seem to have forgotten that you have a sister way past her marriageable age. Did it take a Vidyujaiva to make you understand that your sister needs to be married off?” (118-9).

2.4.5. Nature versus Civilisation

In *The Liberation of Sita*, Sita develops a fear of cities but feels safe in the forest. This shows that the city system and civilization are unfavourable for a woman, exemplified by Sita's life. Her husband abandons her due to his strict adherence to the *dharma* of a king. He abandoned Sita to clear the doubts about her chastity. Therefore, she fears the laws, ethics, moral codes, and systems of civilization and the city. A similar situation can be seen in *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee. Sita lives in the hermitage of Valmiki when she is banished. She believes in teaching her sons about the forest – “We went on long walks through the forest, where they learned to recognize medicinal herbs – particularly the ones that staunch wounds and healed injuries – and how to use them” (331). She finds solace in recalling the life with Rama and Lakshmana in the forest and not the one in the palace.

In *Lanka's Princess*, a vengeful Surpanakha leaves and resides in the Dandaka Forest. She leaves the identity of ‘Meenakshi, the Lanka's princess’ and calls herself ‘Surpanakha’- “*I am like the jungle's tigress*, Surpanakha thought, her keen topaz eyes, dialting. The tigress would run if it could, just as she wanted to right now – flee from Lanka, away from her family. But when trapped, it becomes one of the most dangerous and vicious of all jungle beasts. She was like that tigress” (175). She begins to differentiate between forest and civilization. She finds the forest fair and just

In the wilderness called a jungle, Man could not rule here through his power: he had to survive with the animals. It was a war for all: battling every day for personal survival. And in such a place did she live now. And she loved it, finding beauty in the ravaged wilderness. Unlike Lanka, where there had been ugliness in that magnificent palace [...] The forest was everyone's to have but none's to possess. That is how all lived here: freely, yet restrained with reverence for all. This was her Dandak, her Janasthan, the place where she had been reborn from Meenakshi to Surpanakha. (182)

Her transformation into a saintly woman can be seen in *The Liberation of Sita*. Surpanakha also resides in the forest here. She does not have a nose and ears. However, she channels her pain through gardening. She abandoned thoughts about the lost beauty of her face and identified with things in nature. Therefore, she creates a beautiful garden. She says, “Gradually, I learned to love my hands. I learned how to create, work and serve with those hands. It took more than ten years for all this to happen. After ten years of rigorous practice and hard work bore fruit, I began growing this garden” (14). Surpanakha’s words prove that a woman’s potential is beyond her looks, and beauty lies within.

Sita sees Surpanakha’s garden and gets attracted to it. She compares it to the Ashoka Vanam and finds the latter less beautiful. Sita thinks, “Even Ashoka Vanam would pale in comparison” (10). It shows the characteristic trait of Sita, who loves nature. She finds solace in nature. Even when she left Ayodhya for exile, she was relieved that she would experience the rivers, forests, and mountains. However, she anticipated Rama’s love to be with her, uninterrupted by politics.

Sita is happy about exploring the forest in *The Forest of Enchantments* –

I had the feeling we’d only scratched the surface of what the forest had to offer, that so far it had been testing us. Once it was convinced that we were worthy, that we had truly chosen it over other options, it would open up untold treasures for our enjoyment. What these were, I had no idea. I only sensed that they were deep and intense, enchanting beyond anything I’d ever experienced. Sweet, but with an exciting aftertaste of danger. (122)

Satyavati also realizes the significance of the forest in her redemption in *The Fisher Queen’s Dynasty*. She lives with Ambika and Ambalika in the forest after futile attempts to establish her own dynasty. Here, the forest is frightening – “She heard the growing screams and the frightened cries of the animals, the terror-stricken screeching of the wildly flying birds – the

forest was on fire, the flames licking hungrily at branches and felling tall trees as it ravaged new paths, swiftly approaching her” (324). Here, the wild forest fire symbolizes the ambitions and desires that consumed her.

The forest is a place of belongingness for Bhima in *Bhima: Lone Warrior*. He comes to know from Kunti that he is born a hunter. He wishes to be with Hidimbi in the forest than with Draupadi. He realizes that his *dharma* is to find Ashwatthama and hunt him down, rather than be in heaven -

As I gazed at the green of the distant forests, I felt as if the strength I had lost was flowing back into me. [...] Somewhere inside it, a black-skinned beauty was wandering around, the flames of her passion still unslaked ... Somewhere there, an enemy was wandering around with an open wound on his wounded scalp. While those two people lived, he would not be worthy of the second throne. (356)

2.4.6. Fate versus Free Will

Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments* is interested to learn weaponry. She learns a few lessons through eavesdropping and observation. However, she decides not to use that knowledge while abducted and kept in the Ashoka Forest. She believed in love and waited for Rama to fulfill his *dharma* of a husband. A similar situation is there in *The Liberation of Sita*. He treats Sita like a weakling who needs a man’s protection. Even when Sita knows archery, he does not allow her to use it in times of crisis. Sita remembers a conversation between them when she is in the Ashoka Vanam. Though she could escape easily as she believed, her love for Rama blinded her. This conversation exemplifies the benevolent sexism of Rama:

In our relationship, what is it that you like the most? Sita had asked Rama one day. Protecting you like an eyelid protects the eye...The thought that I’m protecting you gives me greater pride and pleasure than sovereignty over Ayodhya, Rama had said.

... You must look towards me for protection. You must turn to my strong arms for protection. If you take care of yourself, what am I for? Promise me that you will never do that. (63)

The author creates this episode to show where Sita begins her journey of liberation and how it ends. She overcomes/unlearns many gender roles and expectations. She exercises her free will to be with her mother than in a complicated marriage.

Surpanakha, in the novel *Lanka's Princess*, is portrayed as an obedient girl to her father. When he restricts her from learning magic, she restrains herself. However, fate makes her learn it. Also, a prophecy about her comes true –

She's no child –neither small nor inferior in strength or significance [...] I have seen in her the same mad passion that fires Raavan, they are alike. Fiery and resentful, marked by an indignant ill-will. Both will start a terrible war ... [...] She will be responsible for unseen turn of events. She is the one fated to bring about Ravan's destruction just as he is hers.... (31)

In the novel, Surpanakha exercises her free will to instigate the war, which becomes the fate of Raavan, and also her fate, where she realizes the power of a spiritual self and the futility of vengeance and greed. In the same text, Raavan's fate is decided by his over-confidence. In the text, he does penance and gets the boon of immortality but underestimates mortal men – “Man is fleeting!” [...] They are lesser beings – mere mortals! Weak, mean and avaricious, who bring upon their own downfall” (58). Hence, hubris becomes his tragic flaw.

In *Battle Beyond Kurukshetra*, Draupadi's sleep is a prominent motif. She thinks the war has brought her peace because she was vengeful about the humiliation, she faced in the palace of Hastinapur. However, the murder of her children and the realization that Karna is the elder brother of the Pandavas change her fate

As she learns more of his life and actions, her pride in the valour of her husband's slowly erodes. The pride and glory that had sustained her in life and were the bedrock of existence dissipates. Life as she had understood it loses all its purpose and meaning. She realizes that her actions out of anger and vengeance had ultimately turned back on her. In the bland emptiness, life moves beyond all meaning and meaninglessness. (190)

Satyavati in *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* exercises her free will but culminates in the disastrous fate of the Kuru clan. Her desire to make her son the Hastinapur king results in Bhishma's terrible vow. Her desperation to create her dynasty decides the fate of Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika. Bhishma summarises fate – "The war which Vyas mentions will not be between the descendants of the great Kuru king Bharat, but your blood; they are *your* descendants! The Kuru bloodline ended with me, Chitrangad and Virya. *You* are the grand matriarch of this new dynasty that you started. You can't forsake them" (321). Satyavati is blamed for her actions by Bhishma who obeyed her words.

2.4.7. The Redemption of the Self

In *Lanka's Princess*, Surpanakha does not embrace her asura identity initially. When Kumbhakarna asks her to choose between her asura mother and the rishi father, she is diplomatic in her reply – "Being a rishi or an asura is just a matter of attitude involving beliefs and feelings and values and dispositions to act in certain ways, is it not?" (69). The separation from her father is the beginning of her thinking differently -

What was her father saying? 'You are my father!' she cried. 'You are my family.' 'Not anymore; I cannot stay here, nor can you with me. Our worlds have drifted apart.' *That world of the rishis versus the asura, peace versus war, them versus us*, she thought faintly, *that had driven a wedge between us all*. She had lost him. (75)

In the same novel, Surpanakha changes into a lovely person after her marriage to Vidyujiva. Again, she believes in a man's love. However, later on with his death, she changes to a different person – “They believed that I had naively fallen in love with Vidyujiva; it was not love, they thought, but my hopeless foolishness ... Vidyujiva's transgressions were evidence to not just his wickedness but my gullibility” (171). After this incident, she becomes a cruel woman who wants revenge on Raavan for killing Vidyujiva. More than lost love, the abandonment she faced as a child makes her jealous of Raavan.

In the novel *Battle Beyond Kurukshetra*, Draupadi is sleep deprived. Even though Yudhishtira is guilt-ridden, he can sleep. Similarly, Kunti is also able to sleep. Draupadi's sleeplessness makes her recollect all the events in her life. The thoughts of Karna continuously haunt her – “Something fluttered in Draupadi's heart. Something hit hard in an unknown corner of her self-esteem. Forgetting herself, she repeated as if uttering a curse, ‘Karna! Karna! Karna!’ That was the synonym of misfortune for the Pandavas. He always cast the shadow of misfortune on their life!” (23).

The negative thought about Karna is a hindrance to her peace of mind. She finds Karna responsible for her sorrow. Draupadi recollects how happy Karna was while humiliating Draupadi – “Amidst her helpless wails, Dushassana continued his merriment. Karna's uproarious laughter, delighted by that sight, echoed in the courtroom” (61). In *The Palace of Illusions* and *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Wife*, Draupadi loves Karna and is part of her liberation. However, in *Battle Beyond Kurukshetra*, Draupadi is unable to forgive the perpetrators of her humiliation – “*How wrong it was to assume that the anger was gone! The wildfires of anger ignited that day will never burn out. They flare up even now, trying to drive me back to life! In my heart recollecting that scene, the cooling down from empathy or penitence will never happen*” (64). The reason for her sleeplessness and wisdom is her

vengeance. Krishna helps her to come out of this. A similar friendship between Draupadi (Krishna) and Krishna, the *sakhi-sakha* relationship, helps her to realize her worth.

Satyavati realizes her self-worth not through wealth and power but through recognizing her true self as a human being. She thinks -

She had power, wealth, and progeny, but in her heir-yearning, prestige-hungry life, she had witnessed her husband, her two sons, and one grandson die. She thought she had succeeded in using authority to achieve and accomplish, but where had it taken her? At this crossroads where her family would be annihilated in a bloodbath? (319)

Urmila redeems herself by balancing knowledge and household chores with *Sita's Sister*. She is already a victim of patriarchy but has to navigate through the difficulties. Like Sita, Urmila is also abandoned by Lakshmana for the sake of duty towards his brother. Her thirst for knowledge and her managing skills help her cope with it -

What surprised her more was that she had been juggling family and formal duties with easy effortlessness for the past few days. Possibly because she used to discuss the courtly matters of Mithila with her father. He had always encouraged her to get involved in the affairs of the state. But it did not mean she could escape the domestic duties. 'If you can run your home well, you can conquer the world!' her mother once told her. (182)

However, a different Urmila could be seen in *The Liberation of Sita*. The fourth chapter is named "The Liberated". Sita meets her sister Urmila in this chapter. Sita initially feels guilty for leaving Urmila. Urmila is a product of patriarchy. All the family members praised her ability to manage the royal household like Kausalya – "Urmila was very capable in these matters. She could rule with a mere glance. She knew all about the duties of a royal household. Father, too, used to praise her on that count" (62). As a result, Urmila became a

‘victim’ of patriarchy, but she gained wisdom with her fourteen years of penance shut inside a room.

Sita’s notion about her sister’s strength is deconstructed here. Urmila liberates herself when she shuts herself from everything, and her strength influences Sita. On the other hand, Sita’s interests were defined and limited. She loved to be in the garden, practice archery and enjoy nature. However, she passively conforms to patriarchy. She comes out of this with the help of four women. However, Urmila gains strength alone. Sita underestimates Urmila when she thinks that the separation from her husband made her shut herself, but it is proven otherwise. The separation from her husband was utilized as an opportunity to regain herself. Similarly, she advises Sita to use this opportunity to realize her potential – “Each of these trials is meant to liberate you from Rama. To secure you for yourself. Fight. meditate, look within until you find the truth that is you” (71). Thus, absence of a man in a woman’s life is an opportunity to realize self-worth and reclaim a new wise female identity. Sita’s sisterhood teaches her this lesson.

2.5. Conclusion

This chapter dealt with the nature of plots, themes, and motifs used by authors occupying the author’s function in the discourse of retellings. It has addressed the question, ‘what is happening in the discourse of retelling?’. The second section in this chapter dealt with the concept of author-function by Michael Foucault. The key argument is that the author’s identity is not a concern in the discourse of retellings because they deal with myths. Myths always have social, political, and cultural significance. Authors occupying the author function in the discourse of retellings reap market benefits according to the capital they possess. This is dealt with in the fourth chapter. The third section dealt with ‘plotting’ and ‘narrative functions’ in the retellings. The act of creating a plot, or plotting, determines the narrative. It is significant in branding literary text and its authors in the market. Various themes and

motifs also play a crucial role in this. Recurring themes in the retellings are explained with examples in the fourth section. Retellers take different stories from the epics and construct a plot by placing a character at the centre. The nature of this character is explained further in the next chapter with the concept of focalization.

Chapter Three

Narrative and Narration

3.1. Divinity versus Humanity

The act of narration culminating in a narrative is one of the determining factors of the course of events in the discourse of retelling. As mentioned in the previous chapters, authors' identity beyond retellers is insignificant in this discourse. Character is the narrative element that connects the author's function and the narrative. This chapter deals with the nature of characterization in narratives taken for the study.

The Indian epics, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata*, contain many myths propagated through stories. They are repositories of myths that are relevant even today. These myths are transmitted through two of the central characters in the epics – Rama and Krishna. An analysis of the characterisation of Rama and Krishna in the 'original' epics is significant because multiple characters occupy the focal position in the narratives taken for this study. As the focal characters change, the narrative changes. Their positioning in the narrative determines the plot and its social, political, and cultural relevance.

Rama and Krishna are gods in the Hindu religion. Nevertheless, this religious colouring came to these characters with time. W. Crooke, in the article, "The Legend of Krishna" talks about various interpretations of Krishna. He says that Krishna and Rama were not gods in the epics they appear. The divinity of Krishna, at least, began after the decline of Buddhism and the rise of neo-Brahmanism. He traces the origin of the character Krishna beginning from the *Chhandogya Upanishad* to the *Mahabharata*. He calls Krishna a, "new god" mainly because he does not appear in the Vedas. He also adds that the godliness of Krishna was a later addition to the latter text, like the *Bhagavadgita*.

We first hear of Krishna, son of Devaki, in the *Chhandogya Upanishad* [...]. Krishna is here only a scholar, eager to pursue knowledge, and perhaps a member of the military caste. Passing on to the Epic period, in the *Mahabharata*, we find that Krishna occupies a higher place, but still, his divinity is not fully assured. Rama and Krishna are here at once, gods and men. They are accepted as incarnations of Vishnu, but at the same time, they are regarded as human heroes, acting under the influence of human motives and taking no advantage of their divine supremacy. (2-3)

Valmiki's Rama and Veda Vyasa's Krishna were not gods but had traits that equalled them to gods. The God/human distinction did not exist evidently in the two epics. Gods, demons, human beings, all animate and inanimate things are significant in these texts. One could see a stone turning into a beautiful woman (the story of Ahalya) and Vanaras (monkey people) helping Rama to save Sita. However, Valmiki's *Ramayana* is an epic telling Rama's story and deeds. As the name suggests, it is the *Ayana* or the journey of Rama. There are many plots and subplots in the *Ramayana*. Still, it is considered a single narrative poem focusing on Rama. All other characters are somehow related to him. The question of Rama's divinity versus humanity is significant in a larger social, cultural, and political context. The *Balakandam* of the *Ramayana* begins with the question -

Who at present in this world is alike crowned with qualities, and endued with prowess, knowing duty, and grateful, and truthful, and firm in a vow, - who is qualified by virtue of his character, and who is ever studious of the welfare of all creatures? Who is learned, hath studied society, and knoweth the art of pleasing his subjects? And who alone is ever lovely to behold? Who hath subdued his heart, and controlled his anger, is endowed with personal grace, and devoid of malice; and whom enraged in battle, do even the gods fear? Great is my curiosity to hear of such a

person. Thou canst, O *Maharshi* tells me of a man of this description. (Section I, *Balakandam*)

Valmiki's question to Narada is about 'the man' with all these qualities – neither a god nor an incarnation. Sage Narada's answer to Valmiki's question is the entire epic, the *Ramayana*. Here, only the gist of the story is narrated by Narada. The plot was constructed, and the entire poem was composed by Valmiki, and his Rama is a human being. According to Arshia Sattar, the author of the text *Valmiki's Ramayana*, says that Rama's godliness is ambiguous in the so-called original *Ramayana*. At the end of *Yuddhakandam*, the other gods reveal to Rama that he is the incarnation of Vishnu. Also, in the *Balakandam*, he is born after the ritual conducted by Dasharath, and there is a divine intervention mentioned -

Do thou, O lord, dividing thyself into four, O Vishnu, become born as sons in the three wives, resembling Modesty, Auspiciousness, and Fame, —of Ayodhyā's lord, king Daçarātha, cognisant of duty, and munificent, and possessing energy, and like unto a Maharshi. [...] Do thou, for bringing destruction unto the enemies of the gods, turn thy thoughts to being born as a man. (Section XV, *Balakandam*)

In the quote above, the deities and *maharshis* request Vishnu to be born as a man.

Metaphorically, as per their request, Vishnu has to divide his qualities into the sons of Dasharath. As Sattar points out, the divinity of Rama is not consistent in the original, and even Rama is unaware of it. Therefore, it can be concluded that Valmiki's Rama was not a god. The godliness associated with Rama came with time, and in the discourse of retellings, the divinity of divine and superhuman figures is occluded or removed. The question is how this is established through the act of narration. In the *Mahabharata*, the godliness is mainly associated with Krishna. Nevertheless, unlike Rama, Krishna is not the central character

around whom other characters and their stories revolve. In *Adi Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, Dhritarashtra laments about the Kurukshetra war and fears Krishna's role in it -

When I heard Narada declare that Krishna and Arjuna were Nara and Narayana and he (Narada) had seen them together in the regions of Brahma, then, O Sanjaya, I had no hope of success. When I heard that Krishna, anxious to bring about peace for the welfare of mankind, had repaired to the Kurus, and went away without having been able to affect his purpose, then, O Sanjaya, I had no hope of success. When I heard that Karna and Duryodhana resolved upon imprisoning Krishna displayed in himself the whole universe, then, O Sanjaya, I had no hope of success. Then I heard that at the time of his departure, Pritha (Kunti), standing, full of sorrow, near his chariot, received consolation from Krishna; then, O Sanjaya, I had no hope of success. ...When I heard that upon Arjuna having been seized with compunction on his chariot and ready to sink, Krishna showed him all the worlds within his body, then, O Sanjaya, I had no hope of success. (Section I, *Adi Parva*)

These words of Dhritarashtra about Krishna's role in the war show that Krishna was a negotiator and a leader, not God. Even though Narada compares Arjuna and Krishna to Nara and Narayana, respectively, the quality is mentioned here. Here, it must be noted that Dhritarashtra talks about Krishna showing the universe in his body when tempted or angered. This can be interpreted, unless stated explicitly, as the magnanimity of the anger or emotion he shows. It is evident from Dhritarashtra's words that he feared Krishna's active role on the battlefield. Also, nowhere in Vyasa's *Mahabharata* can one find references to Krishna as a god. Different interpretations give rise to multiple versions of Rama and Krishna. In short, at least in the epics, Rama and Krishna are not gods. The current research focuses on the mythic characters' human nature, including Rama and Krishna. The question is how this is

established. The retellings also follow this line of thought which is why they are called *re-telling*. However, the narration and narrative aspects change in the latter discourse.

Rama is the central character in the *Ramayana*, but the *Mahabharata* does not have a single central character to unite the umpteen numbers of subplots. In fact, the subplots could be considered as main plots in isolation, which is why the narrative is highly complicated. The lack of a central character adds to this complexity. In short, the *Ramayana* is a linear narrative, also a coming-of-age narrative, about Rama. But the *Mahabharata* is a multilinear and multidimensional narrative, and challenging to find a simple structure. Suppose *Ramayana* is a narrative about strict adherence to *dharma*. In that case, the *Mahabharata* is about the problems of not following *dharma*, where Krishna acts as a mediator reinstating *dharma* and not the actor, unlike Rama. Even when such an evident difference exists between the two epics, their narrative style has prominent similarities – the first act of narration begins in conversation, then the written document.

Valmiki and Veda Vyasa are considered the authors of the ‘original’ *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In the *Ramayana*, the first narrator of the story of Rama is Narada because his answer to the query of Valmiki is the story of the entire epic, as mentioned before. Narada inspires Valmiki with the gist of the story of Rama, and the latter meditates upon it. Then, he materialises his thoughts as a poem adapting the *śloka* format, which was born out of the grief of seeing the death of a Krauncha bird and his helpmate’s sorrow. Therefore, it is found that there are several narrative layers in the *Ramayana*. The first narrator, Narada, gives a brief account of Rama orally. Later, Valmiki develops it as a written document adopting a poetic language. Throughout the epic, he is the omniscient narrator who utilized poetic license to recreate the oral narrative by Narada. Thus, the act of producing the narrative by Valmiki may also be considered the first act of retelling. Afterward, in the *Uttarakandam* of

the *Ramayana*, Valmiki teaches the epic to his two disciples and the sons of Rama and Sita, Kusha and Lava. They orally transmit the epic to the same characters in the epic about whom the story has been written. In *Uttarakandam*, all these characters encounter each other. This final part of the *Ramayana* is said to be a later addition after the complete composition of the first six parts. Thus, many narrators of the same story but in different mediums exist. This constant shift in the narrator's position explains the lack of closure in the *Ramayana*. The narrative format of the epic has given its flexibility, even though the epic genre is rigid. The contributing factor may be the shifting position of Valmiki, the author and a character in the epic. The case is similar in the narration and narrative of the *Mahabharata*.

The act of narrating in the *Mahabharata* is intriguing because the narrator and the narratee interact with each other. Veda Vyasa expresses his desire to compose an epic inspired by stories from his life and others to Brahma. On the advice of Brahma, he requests Ganesa to write the epic for him as he narrates. However, Ganesa puts forth a condition to Veda Vyasa -

I will become the writer of thy work, provided my pen do not for a moment cease writing. And Vyasa said unto that divinity, wherever there be anything thou dost not comprehend, cease to continue writing. Ganesa, having signified his assent by repeating the word Om!, proceeded to write, and Vyasa began; and by way of diversion, he knit the knots of composition exceeding close; by doing which, he dictated this work according to his engagement. (Section I, *Adi Parva*)

It is clear from this episode that the *Mahabharata* has a narrator and a narratee then and there. Interestingly, this narratee is also the narrator, but the medium of narration changes from oral to written. A narrator is the one with the agency or the agent who tells or transmits the narrative to a narratee. A narratee is a notional figure within the space of the text which must

not be interchangeably used with the implied and actual readers. Here, in the *Mahabharata*, Ganesa is the narratee. Similarly, in the *Ramayana*, Valmiki, the narratee becomes the narrator. However, unlike the retellings, the perspectives in all these scenarios remain the same.

Stories from the two Indian epics are retold in different ways. Authors take a story and construct a plot. They place certain characters in the centre and others on the margins. The events are also arranged in a particular manner. Authors place them motivated by their political, social, and cultural understandings and needs. By placing characters from the epic in a particular way in the story, the authors initiate a narrative. Once that character is placed, he/she would be the centre of the narration. The character sees certain events and narrates them, which reaches a set of readers. The way these narratives are constructed, the changing patterns of narration as the focal characters change, the events that are focalized, the significance of the focalized narrative, and the authorial intervention in focalization are some of the major points addressed in this chapter. Theories of Gerard Genette, Mieke Bal, and Franz Karl Stanzel elucidate the significance of focalization from a structural and functional point of view. The chapter, in summary, deals with how certain narratives are constructed through characterisation and focalization.

3.2. The Making of the Narrative

Stories are everywhere, influencing people in different ways and through different media. The influence of stories on people is a process from time immemorial. When stories not only influence the personal space of the reader but also govern the lives of a whole group of people, that is, a society, it becomes political. Thus, stories influencing, governing, and teaching society something become mythology. Storytelling continues, and mythopoesis or myth-making becomes a constant process. People begin to respect those stories as their lives'

principles, or rather, their religion. When in times of problems in their lives and society, they remember the words of their ancestors and turn to their anecdotal and allegorical narratives for solutions. This is how mythology got established as a religion. According to James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, religion is, “a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life” (50). It is belief and practice which make a religion. The question is how common people know about these things. Myths are the stories that motivate people to practice religion. They contain various values for a good living, recognising the value of the self and the other, as Joseph Campbell³⁷ elaborates in the text *The Power of Myth*.

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are also considered religious texts in the Hindu religion, and they have many myths and stories propagating values about harmonious and disciplined living adhering to *dharma*. However, older myths are retold in contemporary retellings by replacing religiosity with other aspects. The politics of retelling will be elaborated in the next chapter dealing with the concepts of mythopoesis and market. However, it is evident at the outset that there is a restoration of stories, the realization of myths, and a rejuvenation of literature to its true purpose of entertainment and catharsis. Following this tradition, writers began to reinterpret and rewrite the rigid religious scriptures and texts. They intended to continue the storytelling tradition by challenging and following the current social, political, and cultural scenario. The familiarity of the characters is an added benefit to the retellers. When already established characters speak differently to people, they notice it. The characters in retellings are already relevant, and when they speak, people notice. The term ‘focalization’ coined by Gerard Genette, subsequently developed by

³⁷ The major ideas in this text is described in Chapter Four “Mythopoesis and Market” of this thesis

Mieke Bal, explains the possibilities of characterisation and the act of narration with a vision. The present chapter intends to detail the significance of the narratological term focalization, its usage to interpret retellings, and how these focalized narratives work towards continuous mythopoesis.

3.3. Narrative - The Umbrella Term

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the simplest definition of a narrative is, “an account of a series of events, facts, etc., given in order and with the establishing of connections between them” that is, it tells a story. The term has different implications in other contexts, widening the possibility of intense scrutiny rather than leaving it as a moderate and objective entity. The term narrative does not fit into a strict definition. Gerard Genette, in the text *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, mentions three distinct notions associated with the term narrative. In the first meaning, the narrative refers to the narrative statement, either an oral or a written discourse that tells an event or a series of events. Genette terms this as the *narrative*. The second meaning of the narrative is the succession of events (actual or fictitious) that form the subject of the discourse described above or the *narrative*, which Genette terms the *story*. The third meaning is associated with an event, that is, the event of someone recounting something, which he terms as *narrating*. According to Genette, *narrating* is the critical aspect of the narrative discourse (*narrative*) than the elements in a narrative or *story*. He says – “the narrative discourse depends absolutely on that action of telling since the narrative discourse is *produced* by the action of telling in the same way that any statement is the product of an act of enunciating” (26). In the case of retellings, therefore, narrative discourse is created differently from the existing one. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* events are primarily retained in the retellings. Thus, the *story* has remained the same. The current research concerns the *narrating* and the *narrative*, that is, to see how

different perspectives have changed the discourse structurally (epic to novel transition, adaptation, and translation) and functionally (the agency of the character, political implications, and mythopoesis). Even though the *story* is the same in most retellings, the act of *narrating* has brought about a different *narrative* with many implications. As Genette says, “... without a narrating act, there is no statement, and sometimes even no narrative content” (26). Thus, the act of *narrating* is of immense importance in retelling epics considering their socio-political and cultural significance.

There is a need to carry Genette’s notion of *narrating* and the *narrative* to a larger context, not simply restricted to the structural level. Though discussed entirely under a structuralist framework, his idea of focalization can be extended to study the nature of discourse generated by *narrating*. Focalisation serves the purpose of differentiating what is shown and what is not shown in the narrative. When a character is the focalizer, the reader sees a story world containing the character’s mental activity. According to Genette, “Who sees?” is the basis of focalization. Identifying a subtle difference between point of view and focalization is necessary, as these terms cannot be used interchangeably. According to Marie-Laure Ryan³⁸, the reason is that

... point of view stands for a purely spatial position from which a scene is observed whether or not this position is occupied by somebody, while focalization suggests that the scene is inscribed in somebody’s consciousness ... One way for the text to select what is shown and what is not is the narrative device called focalization. An effect of the technique of focalization is to create a distinction between events that take place

³⁸ *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet* by Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote and Maoz Azaryahu

on stage (in the narrative here and now) and events that take place off stage (in a space located elsewhere, mediated by the consciousness of the focalizing character. (20)

Following this, it is necessary to see the types of focalization. There are three types of focalization, according to Genette – zero, internal and external. The first term means that the narrator knows more than the characters in the text. The second term means that the narrator only provides information on what the character knows and nothing more. The third term means that character gives more information than the narrator. In the primary texts selected, there are many instances of focalization.

Gerard Genette, in his text *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, talks about several narratological concepts, purely from a structuralist perspective. They were limited to the text alone. The concepts he introduced concerned only linguistic nuances, enabling textual interpretations. The linguistic interpretation shunned every meaning-making process. This is where Mieke Bal becomes relevant in narratology. She carries forward the tradition of Genette, reshapes his ideas, and renovates the concepts so that myriad interpretations can be brought for textual material. The text *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* continues Genette's narratological arguments and concepts but with differences. In this text, Mieke Bal broadens the theories of narrative by giving it a political and aesthetic angle. According to her, the aesthetic appeal of the text and its political significance must be considered while dealing with its narrative aspects. She calls for, "a theory beyond narratology" (x). She asserts the necessity of viewing the, "narrative as a mode of cultural self-expression" (xi). Thus, Bal advocates for interdisciplinary interferences in narratives and narratology. The addition of Mikhael Bakhtin's idea of dialogism was the first step toward this. Her theory is applicable in the case of retellings because analyzing the narrative solely

for its linguistic traits is not enough. In the context of the Indian epics, it must be noted that the authorial position was not the only position the writers occupied. They also occupied the character position. For example, Valmiki is said to have composed the *Ramayana* and is a character in the text.

Similarly, Veda Vyasa is considered the *Mahabharata*'s author and character. The term *valmeekam* means ant-hills. The lore says that the person who wrote the text while doing penance was engulfed by an ant hill, therefore the name Valmiki. The same is the case of Veda Vyasa. The literal meaning of *veda vyasa* is 'the compiler of Vedas', and it was a title attributed to Krishna Dwaipayana for composing the *Mahabharata*, also known as the fifth Veda. It is a scholarly recognition. Therefore, the questionable author figure in these epics and the well-defined author position in the modern retellings point to a drastic narratological interpretative shift. Thus, it establishes the need to study retellings and their socio-political significance based on Bal's theory of narratology.

Bal defines *narratology* as, "the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events, cultural artifacts that 'tell a story'. Such a theory helps to understand, analyze, and evaluate narratives" (3). The 'evaluation' part is of interest in this research. The question of how narratology helps in the political interpretation of a text is of utmost importance in this research. The renovated narratological concepts of Mieke Bal help in the political analysis of myth-retellings. In order to see how this happens, it is essential to discuss Bal's idea of a narrative text. According to Bal, a narrative text is, "a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee ('tells' the reader) a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof" (5). The terms, "agent" and "subject" are the keywords here. These agents tell a story, that is, "the content of that text [narrative], and produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and 'coloring' of a

fabula; the fabula is presented in a certain manner” (5). The “manifestation”, “colouring” and “inflection” are indicators of subjectivity and thereby point to the political aspect of a narrative. The author decides the fabula, or “a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors” (5). This means there is an external control over the text, unlike the structuralist view of the text as autonomous and the poststructuralist view of the dead author. The events in the fabula are arranged in a particular way to achieve a particular effect ‘designed’ by someone outside.

Nevertheless, this outsider may or may not be hidden. However, narrating is conducted throughout the narrative by characters, actors, and focalizers. How a narrative is arranged - the placing of the actors/character/localizers and the selection and combination of events in the story - influences the effect of the fabula. Bal opines, “The fabula is the result of the mental activity of reading, the interpretation by the reader, influenced by the initial encounter with the text and the manipulations of the story. The fabula is a memory trace that remains after the reading is completed” (10).

In short, the writer arranges, the narrator conveys, and the reader understands. This interaction is a cultural phenomenon. As Bal says, “[a] narrative is a cultural phenomenon, one of the many cultural processes by which we live” (10). The interpretation of such a narrative is also culturally and politically motivated. Thus, it is subjective and thereby subjected to cultural constraints. This is the core idea of Bal’s theory. Now the question is about the significance of this theory of narratology in the context of Indian myths and their retellings. Here, the concept of focalization comes into play. In order to see how it works, it is equally important to discuss the concept of ‘narrator’.

In terms of structuralism and post-structuralism, a narrative is a representation of history and other events in a manner condescending to a particular ideology, like grand

narratives, which are justificatory accounts about the ways of a society, a community and a specific period in history. Going by this definition of a narrative, Indian epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are grand narratives designed so that they became a constitution that governs people's lives even today. The increased charm of these narratives is evident from the fact that stories are taken from these texts to be retold and reimagined to fit the needs of the time. Before coming to the features of Indian epics and their retellings, it is necessary to mention the general features of Indian Narratology and other concepts of narrative theory, like focal characters, focalization, and the author/reader dichotomy.

3.4. Indian Narratology and Other Narratological Concepts

Indian Narratology (2003) by K Ayyappa Paniker³⁹ is a monograph about the features of Indian narratives. He believed that fictional criticism in India had stunted growth mainly because of the overemphasis on poetry and drama, and colonialism. There are passing references to narratives in some texts related to the poetics of Indian literature, like *Dhvanyaloka* by Anandhavardhana. The devastation of colonialism left certain sections of people in India unrooted in their indigenous culture. Being rooted in one's culture and having profound knowledge about it are the prerequisites to developing a poetics about the narratives in India. According to Paniker, theories about fictional narratives are left unexplored due to the sabotaging effect of a colonial past. His attempts to fill this gap are materialized in this text in which he identifies ten distinctive features of Indian narrative which are not exclusive to the realm of Indian literature as such. The differences are subtle and not mutually exclusive. Also, he describes different types of narratives available in Indian literature in

³⁹ Dr. K. Ayyappa Paniker was a prominent figure in Malayalam literature. He was a critic, poet, and scholar well-versed in Indian aesthetics and literary tradition.

separate chapters, which will be detailed in the following paragraphs to help understand the development of the novel form used for retellings.

One of the major terms Paniker uses is, ‘interiorisation’ which is, “the process by which a distinction, a contrast or even a contradiction is effected between the surface features of a text and its internal essence” (4). Though the language of the text is simple, the idea is intense to comprehend. In Paniker’s terms, a good writer would make the outer layer, or the narration, simple. However, the inner layers, or the narrative, would be complex and convey many meanings to the reader. Valmiki’s *Ramayana* is an example of an interiorised narrative. It is not just the story of the deeds of Rama but contains multiple layers of narration and a series of oppositions and dialectical relationships with its characters. This particular nature of the epic makes it the favourite material for retellers, along with the *Mahabharata*, which again has the feature of interiorisation at its core. The *Mahabharata* also inhabits the second feature identified by Paniker, known as ‘serialization’. This process is innate in most Indian narratives in which there would be a series of episodes that do not reach closure. Take away or add one or two episodes to the magnum opus *Mahabharata*; the narrative can be grasped in its totality without disturbing the organic unity of the text. The episodic narration serves the purpose of providing expansiveness to the main narrative. Experiments with tone and style are possible even in the middle of the work, and gaps in the narrative are internalised not problematised. In a way, the retellings are serialisations of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* episodes mainly because of the decentralisation manifested through adding and deleting particular episodes from the main narrative and dealt with separately in the novel form. Paniker says such a process, “contributes to the internal richness of the human experience adumbrated in a long narrative” (8). Gerard Genette’s concept of ‘focalization’

and the ‘multiplicity’ of focal characters can be read along this context as explained in the text *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*.

The flexibility of the main narrative, evident from the extent of serialization happening in it, calls for multiple retellings available today. It involves a slight amount of fantasizing, which is the third feature identified by Paniker. He says that any feature of Indian narrative has its origin in fantasy. The Indian mind constantly probed the nature of reality, and it enjoyed transforming apparent reality into legends and myths. Even the unpleasant realities of the outside world could be accommodated with the help of fantasies. It is highly subjective and continues to be encouraged in narration in India. It is easy to, “subject the objective world to the subjectivity of the collective human imagination” (9). The categorisation is another feature of Indian narratives to be looked at. The process involves the abstraction of concrete ideas in order to convey a moral. Like *Panchatantra* stories, the epics are also filled with allegories to convey a message. For instance, the role of Vanara king Sugriva in the *Ramayana* determines the future course of events in the epic, which conveys the idea that humans and animals (even nature as a whole, from a romantic perspective) should have a harmonious relationship. However, the problem arises when such fantasies and allegories lose their literary charm and become politicised. For example, in the text *Why Men Rape?* by Tara Kaushal, the author reports her direct experience with rapists who quote from the epic to have control over women. Sita’s abduction due to the crossing of *Lakshmana rekha*, Surpanakha’s sexual promiscuity, and Draupadi’s polyandry equaling strong sexual desires were some of the myths they put forth to substantiate their deeds and exercise power over women. The retellings taken for this study address more significant social issues, which will be dealt with in the subsequent chapter.

The fact that retellings are simultaneously new and old narratives point to the fourth feature of Indian narratives called ‘cyclicalisation’. The newness of retellings is attributed to the thematic innovations in the stories. The oldness is associated with the similarity of events in both the epics and the retellings. Many storytellers in India use this technique based on the idea that everything is recycled, like the cycle of day and night and the cycle of seasons. According to Paniker, the process of cyclicalisation is used by writers for intellectual and moral communication. The events narrated in the retellings are taken from the epic but are given a new treatment. For example, *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee describes the events of the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi’s perspective. As mentioned earlier, the decentralization of characters brings out narratives in abundance and with variety.

‘Anonymisation’ is yet another feature of Indian narratives that must be read along this line. The author’s anonymity or the author’s confusing position is a contributing factor to the lack of closure and the variety of interpretations of (at times, interferences in) the stories in the epics. The ‘original’ epic is a myth mainly because of the questionable authorship. The attributed authorship of Valmiki and Veda Vyasa is a way of conveying the idea of the author as just an individual who uses language, which is, “an instrument of collective expression” (Paniker 13). The concept of the “death of the author” by Roland Barthes stands akin to this. According to Barthes, writing is a way of destruction, nullifying every voice and point of origin. It is a neutral space where all identities dissolve, more or less lost. Attributing the origin of a text to a person is unnecessary, which assumes the hierarchy that the author was born before and the text after. In contrast, only language exists, which performs without reaching a tangible destination. It is continuously deferred. This slashes the authority of the author, who was taught to be the child’s creator and father -

...the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation, and every text is eternally written here and now. (Barthes, 145)

In the case of anonymisation, the author's absence calls for the narrator's importance. However, the narrator and the reader are not, in any manner, in a power hierarchy where the narrator is the supreme authority. On the other hand, the subjective self of the narrator is merged with the collective readership, which makes the narrator and the reader one. Veda Vyasa is an internalized narrator and also a significant character in the *Mahabharata* which may be seen as an opportunity or a metaphor of anonymity that enables the reader to interfere in the narrative. According to Paniker, the author's anonymity ensures the work's timelessness and enables the reader to take whatever the reader wants from the text. Barthes was not concerned about the generation of meaning by the act of reading, which he considered a futile activity. He preferred disentangling to decipher, non-fixity of meaning, and also the impersonation of the reader along with the scripture. Nevertheless, the modern retellings are aberrations to this conception because the narrator matters and the author's presence is evident; for example, the novels of Kavita Kane are from a feminist perspective with female focal characters from the epic, which is a reflection of the author's political stance on feminism (except one fictional character Uruvi in *Karna's Wife*). Different focal characters view the same epic from various perspectives, and it has socio-political implications, which shall be dealt with in the upcoming sections.

Genette in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* distinguishes between the narrative time and the story time in which the former is the time of the signifier and the latter that of the signified. In the case of the *Mahabharata*, there are many narrative times even

during its origin, though the story time has remained the same (continues to be the same in the retellings taken for this study). According to the myth, Veda Vyasa appointed Ganesa, the elephant-headed god, to write the lines he would utter. Ganesa made a condition that Vyasa must not stop anywhere while reciting the poetry he composed. On the other hand, Vyasa agreed and made another condition that Ganesa must understand every line Vyasa says. After the composition of the epic, Vyasa recited them to his disciples, who perpetuated the epic in various locations. It was Vaisampayana who told the story to Janamejaya during the latter's snake sacrifice ritual, and it is essential because it was a narrative of Janamejaya's family history. It is of immense significance that this narrative is embedded in the narrative of Ugrasrava Sauti, a sage who tells stories to a gathering of sages in the Naimisha forest. Thus, the epic *Mahabharata* was an interpreted text (a writerly text) in its very origin. This is one of the reasons why a proper origin date could not be attributed to this epic. This tradition has been continuing even now in the form of retellings. Interestingly, the narrative time of the retellings persuades the reader to reconsider the story time of the epics, paving the way for a more significant socio-cultural and political analysis. For example, Ahalya in the text *Ahalya's Awakening* debates with her husband Rishi Gautama regarding the concept of marriage, chastity, and trust. In the popular versions of the *Ramayana*, she is cursed without seeking clarification, and Rama liberates her. The original epic suggested that the characters lived in a world of patriarchy where women had no agency. Nevertheless, today, when Ahalya speaks for herself, it reflects the nature of contemporary society in which women speak out about their issues. Suppose Genette restricted his arguments about narrative and story time to a purely structuralist ambit. In that case, this study looks for possibilities to carry them forward, placing them in a larger discourse. One such attempt was to analyse how the proximity and distancing of narrative time and story time influence other discourses and vice versa. For example, as the proximity between story time and the narrative time

decreases, they become more conflicting. For example, in the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, Rama was a noble king. With time, Rama became a religious symbol, and many political upheavals happen even today. This points to another feature of Indian narratives defined by Paniker, which is the elasticisation of time. The nature of narrative time in Indian narratives is more psychological than logical. Paniker says, “There is ... a deliberate attempt on the part of the narrator to leave the supposed time of the supposed happenings in an undefined area of time, thereby shifting the emphasis from a definite dateline to indefinite infinity” (15). This feature is found in the epics, making it difficult to reach closure. However, the retellings are grounded in narrative time, if not in storytime. For example, the incident of Delhi Gang Rape is mentioned indirectly through the characters Dhenuka and Roshni (characters not found in the original) and the debate between Bharata and Rama in the text *Scion of Ikshvaku*, making it more contemporary.

3.5. The Focal Character

Joseph Campbell, in the text *The Power of Myth*, envisions a hero – “The courage to face the trials and to bring a whole new body of possibilities into the field of interpreted experience for other people to experience – that is the hero’s deed” (Ch. 2). The hero’s deed becomes a role model for people to face certain circumstances and situations. In the retellings, many characters take the position of the focal character through which we see the story from a different perspective, informing the way of life required today. This perspective-making is, in turn, expected by the reader who subscribes to the didactic/pedagogic function of the myth.

The selected primary texts have more women as focal characters. One of the reasons is that their voices were not so heard in the epics. Another possible reason is the role of women in deciding the fate of mankind. The conversation between Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers in *The Power of Myth* elaborates this aspect, “Why are women the ones held

responsible for the downfall? They represent life. Man doesn't enter life except by woman, and so it is woman who brings us into this world of pairs of opposites and suffering" (Ch. 2). This idea should be taken from a mythological point of view.

3.5.1. Internal Focalisation

The narrative style of *The Liberation of Sita* exemplifies internal focalization by the character Sita. Sita thinks – "Eighteen years ago... Surpanakha came seeking Rama's love. What a pretty woman! The wicked prank played by Rama and Lakshmana left her horribly disfigured" (7). The words 'pretty' and 'wicked' determine the plot. Sita is compassionate about Surpanakha. She found her beauty eighteen years ago. The inhumane act of Rama and Lakshmana made her look ugly. However, Sita still finds beauty in her. Surpanakha, too, is shown as a stoic person who has recognised a woman's inner beauty.

Another instance of internal focalization by Sita is when she thinks about women used as instruments in war and revenge. She thinks – "Do women exist only to be used by men to settle their scores? Rama and Lakshmana would not have done this to Surpanakha if they did not know that she was Raavan's sister. Rama's objective was to provoke Raavan; his mission, to find a cause to start a quarrel with Raavan, was accomplished through Surpanakha" (7). Sita questions Rama's intentions and his deliberate inhumane act of deforming Surpanakha for his achievement. The author has used the words 'quarrel' and 'provoke' to describe Rama's mission. It was Rama who had a complaint about Raavan. He initiated the war and the consequences. If Surpanakha was used as a tool initially, Sita was used to establish *dharma*. In both cases, women are the casualties. An instance of internal focalization by the character of Surpanakha asserts this statement – "Was anguish inevitable for women who love Sri Rama?" (11).

Through internal focalization, Sita underestimating her sister's ability is evident. She thinks that Urmila is depressed because Urmila has shut herself down for fourteen years: "Fourteen years – how did she live without talking to anyone and without meeting her people? How deeply she must have been hurt to have taken such a decision! Fourteen years! Will she forgive me, Rama and Lakshmana?" (60). Readers will have to think the same through internal focalization. The reality is disclosed only in the episode where Sita meets Urmila. In the text *Forest of Enchantments*, Urmila wants to accompany Sita to the forest after learning that Rama wants to conduct another test of fire. She strongly wishes to abandon Lakshmana, but Sita stops her. The internal focalization of Sita's character shows the strength of her individuality -

Rage rises in me until my whole body is scorched, for some kinds of burning don't require a fire. Not a word of love, not a word of apology for the sorrow he has caused me. Not a word about the unjust and cruel way in which he sent me away. He hasn't even called me by my name. It's clear to me now, what I need to do. Anger and self-pity are useless emotions, so I push them away and speak calmly, even though my heart is breaking all over again. (355-6)

From this, Rama's failure to recognise the duty towards his wife can be deduced. Her internal focalization describes the nature of Rama's deed – unjust and cruel. However, she abandons negative feelings and regains her strength. She politely refuses to undergo the test of fire and feels liberated when she goes to another world, the *paataal*.

In the same text, through Sita, other women characters in the epic and their tragedy are revealed. The internal focalization of Sita places other female characters too in the novel –

Kaikeyi, second queen of Ayodhya, who wrested our throne from us out of blind devotion to her son, only to be hated by him for it; Ahalya, her beauty turned to stone by a husband's jealous fury; Surpanakha, wild enchantress of the forest, whose gravest crime was to desire the wrong man; Mandodari. Wife to the legendary demon king, forced to watch her kingdom fall into ruin, and her beloved son perished because of her husband's obsession with another woman; Urmila, my sweet sister, the forgotten one, the one I left behind as I set off with blithe ignorance on my forest adventure with my husband. (4)

Through this internal focalization, the author exhibits the plight of other female characters and Sita. She becomes the voice for these women. The author's feminist ideals are also revealed in the entire text. The internal focalization of Bhishma in the novel *Fisher Queen's Dynasty* is like this section. Bhishma is on the bed of arrows recollecting the women in his life, especially Satyawati -

He shut his eyes in self-repugnance. As he thought about how he had failed all the women in his life: his mother, Ganga; Vatsala, his bride-to-be; Amba, Ambika and Ambalika, the three princesses he had abducted (but most of all, Amba, whom he lost in the fire of love and hate); Kunti, Gandhari and Madri, his grand-daughters-in-law, whom he had used as pawns for political power; Uruvi, Karna's wife, to whom he had promised he would save her husband; and lastly, Draupadi, whom he could not defend at her worst hour in that very hall where he had killed a man who dared to slander the good name of a Kuru queen, Satyawati. He had destroyed them all, for her – for that one woman...*Satyavati*. (3)

Kavita Kane establishes the politics of her novels through the internal focalization of Bhishma. Her feminist ideology is evident through the shifting focalization between the

character of Satyawati and Bhishma in this text. Bhishma is one of the bravest characters in the epic *Mahabharata*, who is an invincible warrior. However, by showing Bhishma in a vulnerable state at the beginning of the text, Kavita Kane christens Satyawati as the invincible character through her narrative.

In the text *Scion of Ikshvaku* by Amish Tripathi, Vashishtha intensifies the impression of father-son conflict, which can be understood through internal focalization – “The guru observed his student with sadness. *Truth be told, Emperor Dashrath blamed Ram for his defeat at the hands of Raavan. He would have found some excuse or the other to stop visiting Kaushalya, regardless of the incident*” (59-60). From this instance, the reader can deduce that Dashrath probably lost interest in his first wife because of Kaikeyi. Also, Vashishtha expresses sadness for Rama because he is unsure when Dashrath will accept the latter as his son. From this focal point, the narrative shows that Rama and Dasharath have a conflicting relationship, which changes as the novel progresses. The changing dynamics of the father-son relationship is one of the significant aspects of this novel, intensifying its impact because immediately after Dasharath acknowledges his love for Rama, the latter must be sent to exile. Therefore, a melodramatic ambience is created through the narrative by the author.

Suspense is created through internal focalization. The narrator describes an episode in the *Scion of Ikshvaku* where Vashishtha meets a Naga, which Lakshmana finds out. After eavesdropping on their conversation, the fear in Lakshmana is described – “Lakshmana let out a deep breath as the two men walked away. His heart was pounding desperately. *What is Guruji up to? Are we safe here?*” (81). Through Lakshmana, readers are made to think the same, making them want more information regarding this incident. In a similar incident later in the novel, Lakshmana once again coincidentally comes across a conversation between Vashishtha and the Naga in the ninth chapter, which makes him suspect some plotting against

Rama by Bharata. This also points to the fragile bond of trust among the four brothers, primarily because of Lakshmana. The italicised sentence increases the impact of the suspense either revealed in the same text or the next novel in the series, therefore creating a demand. In the epic, justification of certain deeds is provided through internal focalization. Karna is always considered a person of low birth. In Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions*, the internal focalization of Draupadi justifies why Karna was not allowed in her *swayamvara* -

Later, some would commend me for being brave enough to put the upstart son of a chariot driver in his place. Others would declare me arrogant. Caste-obsessed. They'd say I deserved every punishment I received. Still, others would admire me for being true to dharma, whatever that means. But I did it only because I couldn't bear to see my brother die. (96)

The author clears Draupadi from her act of ostracising Karna from her *swayamvara* because of his caste. The author wants to foreground her feminist ideas by saying that women are tools in men's politics, as the narrative suggests. Karna and Dhrishtadyumna were about to wage war against each other, and Draupadi had to be a pawn in this game to save her brother's life. The author finds Karna as the appropriate partner for Draupadi. Through internal focalization, the author establishes the goodness of Karna – "I was uncomfortable, miserable, disillusioned – and most of all, angry with Arjun. I'd expected him to be my champion. It was the least he could have done after plucking me from my home. When inside me a voice whispered, Karna would never have let you down like this, I did not hush it" (109).

However, a different Draupadi is shown through the internal focalization of Bhima in the novel *Bhima: Lone Warrior* by M T Vasudevan Nair. In this text, Draupadi is shown to

love only Arjuna. In one of the episodes, Bhima is disappointed, realising that she loves only Arjuna. He says, “Four years, and Draupadi was to be with me again. [...] I cleared my throat and was about to call her name when she murmured, without opening her eyes, ‘The killing of Kalakeya. Tell me the story fully...’ I pulled myself up. No, I did not desire her cold body tonight, as she lay dreaming of Arjuna” (221).

From this, it can be deduced that identification with any of these characters is impossible because, through internal focalization, the possibilities of the characters’ multiple thoughts are disclosed. In some texts, Draupadi is a round character; that is, she is initially vulnerable and realises her worth and individual strength later, like *Yajnaseni*, *The Palace of Illusions*, and *Battle Beyond Kurukshetra*. In other texts, she has strict agency and is a strong feminist character like *Karna’s Wife* and *Bhima: Lone Warrior*. In *Battle Beyond Kurukshetra*, Draupadi is haunted by Karna’s thoughts – “*That was when he entered my life as a horrific misfortune. And he always loomed over it as an ill fate. Now at the end of everything, his memory burns up even what remains of an empty life to ashes!*” (24).

Draupadi cannot cope with the haunting memories of Karna, who was cruel to her (the episode of disrobing her in the Kaurava court was initiated by him). However, towards the end of the novel *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi is shown to grab Karna’s hands when she ascends to heaven as if her love for him became true. Similarly, in *Karna’s Wife: An Outcast’s Queen*, she explicitly reveals her desire for Karna, noticed by Uruvi. Therefore, internal focalization has brought about multiple characteristic traits of a single character.

Female characters in some of the retellings express their sexuality and exercise their power, as exemplified by internal focalization in the novel *The Fisher Queen’s Dynasty* by Kavita Kane -

She had transformed: from a young and innocent girl to a woman who was aware of her sexuality and her power over men. She was a virgin again; Kali smiled with a curl of her lips, *though not as chaste as social norms dictate*, she thought. She could not care less; she could not help but laugh at how that sheer skin was considered a trophy for men to want and venerate. It had freed her: she had power and control over her life and love. [...] Kali found that she was rediscovering herself, unrepentant and unapologetic about her deeds and her decisions. Desire did not shame her, nor did lust overawe her. After the episode with Parashar, she knew it was her sharpest weapon to cleave and carve a better life for herself. (27)

Satyavati is shown to think about her sexuality after she consummates with Parashar. It is not Parashar's boon but Satyavati's realisation of her free will in sexual desires that empower her. This was a rite of passage for Satyavati to become a queen of a great dynasty from a fisherwoman.

3.5.2. External Focalisation

An instance of external focalization can be seen in the text where Lava and Kusha are excited about taking Sita to see Surpanakha's garden. The focalized narrative begins like this –

“Walking through the impenetrable jungle holding their mother's hands, giving her courage so she would not get scared, showing her all the marvels of the place – the very thought filled the boys with irrepressible joy” (8). The author has written ‘giving courage’ to show that Sita is not courageous according to her children. The boys expect to bestow that courage on their mother. However, the external focalization of Surpanakha's character shows otherwise – “On Sita's face, Surpanakha could only see peace and dignity; there was no trace of distress. Sita has matured a lot, thought Surpanakha” (11). This instance points to the sisterhood shared by

Surpanakha and Sita. Sita also establishes a sisterhood bonding with Ahalya gradually. Initially, her encounter with Ahalya did not go well. Through external focalization, the author describes the denial in Sita's character – "Sita's face lost colour. She felt that Ahalya was insulting her. How often she had thought of her in these last few days, but perhaps Rama was right. Perhaps she was characterless after all" (26). Sita's realisation of her suffering and the subsequent liberation through Ahalya begins with such a denial.

Sita identifies with Renuka, the wife of Sage Jamadagni and the mother of Parasurama. Her son attempted to behead her because his father suspected her chastity. Through external focalization, one understands how Sita is influenced by her life – "Renuka's words had caused aversion in Sita that day. Now she could understand Renuka's pain. The day Rama demanded a trial by fire, the day he sent her away into the forest, Sita remembered the sand pot Renuka had made. Ahalya, Renuka, Sita – they were all victims of mistrust and humiliation" (55).

The father-son conflict is made evident through external focalization. The initial feeling of Dasharath towards Rama was hatred. This is exemplified in one of the episodes in *Scion of Ikshvaku* –

Ram continued to kneel, but the official acknowledgment was not forthcoming. [...] Palpable embarrassment spread in the hall as Ram waited. A murmur among the courtiers reaffirmed what was well known – Ram was not the favoured son. The son remained still and unmoved. Truth be told, he was not the least bit surprised. Used to disdain and calumny, he had learnt to ignore. (99)

Rama is used to his father's ignorance and antagonism. However, his feelings are reflected in the attitude of the courtiers, who murmur that he is not their favourite son. Through external

focalization, the author establishes the father-son conflict and lays the ground for the change in this complicated bonding.

Roshni and Manthara share a similar bonding in the *Scion of Ikshvaku*. Manthara is portrayed as a wealthy merchant with avarice, but her daughter Roshni (a fictional character added by the author) is the exact opposite. The characterisation of Roshni shows Manthara's sinister nature. The purpose of bringing such a character is to describe Manthara, and external focalization helps here – “Roshni immediately fell silent. Ram could see that she was hurt. He knew she was uncomfortable about the fabulous wealth that her mother possessed. It pained her that many in her country were mired in poverty. Roshni was known to avoid, if possible, the legendary parties that her mother frequently threw” (105-6). Roshni acts as a character foil to Manthara. The former informs the most about the character of Manthara. Later in the text, Roshni's death reveals the cruelty of Manthara, culminating in her manipulation of Kaikeyi and the exile of Rama.

External focalization hints at the secondary status of a woman's intelligence and prioritising her beauty instead. In the novel *Ahalya's Awakening*, Ahalya is portrayed as an intelligent woman who learned to make complete sentences by the age of two and learned grammar by the age of six. Through the external focalization of her Guru, her superiority over her brother Divodas is established -

And there was a huge truth that the Guru allowed only himself to know: Ahalya was far more intelligent than her brother. The girl was brilliant, and she displayed that brilliance quietly, as was her nature, but Vashishtha wondered whether her parents would be able to handle her extraordinariness; they were more fascinated by her beauty than her intelligence. (11)

Here, Vashishtha worries Ahalya about her parents' ignorance of her talents. In the later part of the narrative, it can be found that she is married to Rishi Gauthama and subsequently cursed for her infidelity. She is not recognised for her intelligence but for her beauty, which becomes a problem later.

In the same text, Ahalya and Indra meet for the first time when the latter helps her brother Divodas. Her first impression of Indra is described in an indifferent tone and through external focalization

Ahalya noticed that the man who had helped her brother in the war was barely listening to her mother's words; he looked utterly transfixed. He was staring unabashedly at her, as if in a trance. But it was she who looked disconcerted and embarrassed. She felt a flush rise hotly up her neck and her face. She was used to appreciative looks, but his was burning through her. (27)

Ahalya notices Indra's attraction toward her. However, she is 'disconcerted', 'embarrassed', and 'burning' hinting at a negative emotion toward Indra's looks. She is shown as experiencing discomfort, maybe because of the lust she notices in him. This episode establishes the novel's climax, where Indra consummates his desire, but Ahalya faces the brunt. It is chaos in Ahalya hinted here, which continues till the climax. In the subsequent chapters of the text, external focalization reveals Indra's lust for her – "She had the most alluring walk he had ever seen. Her small, rounded hips were sheathed in sky-blue silk, draped loosely but allowing light to ripple the fabric as she moved, so that it flowed sinuously like a thick sensuous liquid" (34). Clearly, the use of words 'alluring', 'rounded hips', and 'sensuous' establishes the fact that Indra lusts for Ahalya. However, her rejection of his marriage proposal later infuriates him and makes him vengeful. External focalization reveals the vengeance in Indra. The subtle change of lust to vengeance is disclosed -

Indra tried not to let his emotions show on his face. So, she was refusing him. A white-cold ungovernable fury slithered through him, and it took all his control to not unleash it. He lowered his eyes to hide his confusion, his humiliation and his rage. Why, *why* did she not want him? And what rankled him further was that she had been in control the whole time; this he wasn't used to. It infuriated him. (52)

Indra's ego is exposed, he is unable to bear the rejection from Ahalya. The repetition of the word "why" shows anger and desperation. Above all, he could not handle the superiority of a woman, which is why he is "rankled".

3.5.3. Zero Focalisation

The character establishment of Rama in the text *Scion of Ikshvaku* is done through zero focalization, where the third-person narrator describes Rama's posture as an expert archer. The narrator describes Rama's expertise like this – "He had to wait for the perfect moment. *It must be a clean strike...* He quietly cast his white *angavastram* aside to reveal a battle-scarred, dark-skinned torso. *The cloth should not interfere with the release of the arrow*" (1). Italicised sentences reveal more information about Rama's character. Rama yearns to be flawless in every aspect of his life. The white cloth he wears also symbolises this. At the same time, Rama is peace-loving but shall not give up peace and wage war if *dharma* is challenged. The second italicised sentence points to this characteristic trait of Rama. Thus, zero focalization reveals more information than the characters in the novel to the readers. The third-person narrator is placed so that the character is focused or envisioned in a particular manner to move the narrative forward.

Manthara's social status is revealed through zero focalization in *Scion of Ikshvaku* –

Manthara stood by the window in her office room, built at the far end of the official wing of her palatial residence. The exquisitely symmetrical garden, along with the estate, was appropriately smaller when compared to the emperor's; a conscious choice. It was also perched on a hill, though lower than the one on which the royal palace stood. Her residence adequately reflected her social status. (111)

The words 'palatial' and 'exquisitely symmetric' show that Manthara belongs to the upper class. Simultaneously, the phrase 'lower than the one on which the royal palace stood' indicates that she was not of royal birth. The 'conscious choice' of a garden more miniature than the emperor's garden shows that Manthara yearned to have the privilege of birth. She is constantly reminded of her low birth, which intensifies her greed. The technique of zero focalization elucidates this.

Karna's distress because of the insult he faced during the exhibition of talents in Hastinapur is hinted at, not explicitly, through zero focalization in *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* – "The audience was hushed as everybody waited eagerly for an answer. Only the youth remained strangely silent, staring at the horizon where the sun was slowly disappearing. His handsome face was sapped of its radiant pride. His lips were clenched, and his noble head was bowed, as if in shame. The proud archer suddenly appeared lost" (4).

This description of Karna through zero focalization conveys the disappointment he faced. The words clenched lips and bowed head hint at the humiliation. This establishes how strong caste discrimination is. The clause "the sun was slowly disappearing" symbolises that even the Sun, the father of Karna according to the *Mahabharata*, is shown as helpless. This suggests the intensity of the humiliation and helplessness Karna faced.

The closing lines of the final chapter of *Lanka's Princess* is an example of zero focalization summarising the deeds of Surpanakha and her final liberation – “She kept walking, ignoring the sinking sand, the crashing waves, and soon she felt the sifting ground under her feet giving way to a bottomless, dark abyss and the sea gently closing over her. She smiled as she again shut her golden, staring eyes to the eternal peace of that swirling darkness” (296). Surpanakha is assumed to be guilt-ridden and liberates herself from her vengeance. The plot of this text is about the transition of Meenakshi, Lanka's princess, to Surpanakha. She had a grudge against her brother Raavan for killing her beloved Vidyutjiva, which made her plot against Raavan and the war between Rama and Raavan occurred. As mentioned above, the chapter's closing lines show the end of her vengeance and liberation.

Kavita Kane uses zero focalization in *Sita's Sister* to explain the condition of women characters in the epic. The whole novel has Urmila as the focal character exposing the follies of a patriarchal society, especially the notion that educating women is enough and letting them out of the societal stereotypes is unthinkable -

Mandavi had been right when she called them the cloistered princesses. They were largely that, although they were well versed in the Vedas and the Upanishads, politics, music, art and literature. They had journeyed fabulous worlds, traversing unknown frontiers – but all in the mind, sitting in the verandahs and chambers of the palace of Mithila which overlooked the distant horizon of an undiscovered world. (9)

The author points out the futility of the superficial education provided to women here. It is Urmila that goes against this narrow-mindedness in the novel. Immediately after this episode in the text, there is the internal focalization of Urmila, who craves to explore the world and gain more knowledge. She is shown to have no interest in marriage, which is just a

mandatory social institution without the space for a woman's free will. Placing this section in the whole narrative is a way of manifesting the author's political stance.

The strength of Urmila's character is established through another instance of zero focalization. Sita is the adopted daughter of Janaka, but she is privileged. Urmila being the first biological daughter of Janaka, was always secondary to Sita, which she approved of – “[Sita's] upbringing had not been normal; she could not recall a single instance when she had been scolded or frowned upon. Urmila had suffered all of that and taken it with a brave smile on a trembling chin...But never had Sita seen Urmila resentful about all the favours showered upon her, when she was deprived of them” (23). The author justifies the selection of Urmila as a strong focal character for her novel, conveying feminist ideals. Urmila had to suffer, but she bravely navigated through them. On the other hand, Sita is an emotionally weak character initially, only getting strong after the exile, abduction, and the test of fire.

Raavan is not portrayed in this text as a demonic figure. Through zero focalization, Raavan gets a descent characterisation – “Raavan was an accomplished scholar, keenly acknowledged in the Vedas, music – he played the veena splendidly it seemed – and abstruse subjects as assorted as astrology, architecture, Ayurveda and political science. He was said to be the mightier of all kings and showed lavishly” (29). Unlike other narratives like the *Prince of Ayodhya*, Raavan is a better character here. Kavita Kane's attempt to remove all extraordinariness from the characters is evident because her mythopoesis is to propagate her feminist ideals.

Zero focalization at the beginning of the text *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* explains Satyavati's desire for power –

The smell of dirt and decay wafted in the damp air, but the girl sitting alone on the shore seemed unperturbed. She had sat down on the rock, burying her face in her hands, her slim body shuddering with silent cries. [...] They had ransacked and rummaged through the boat she ferried across the river every day. She had been searched like a common streetwalker. (9)

In this scene, the character of Satyavati is shown weeping over her plight for being born a commoner. This opening paragraph of the text's first chapter justifies Satyavati's unscrupulous journey to have power over the throne of Hastinapur. She was looked down upon as a stinking fisher girl by everyone around her. Her perseverance and unabashed willpower to be in power make her a prominent feminist character portrayed by Kavita Kane.

3.6. Conclusion

The principal argument in this chapter is that multiple focalizations adopted by various retellers decentralise the character position, shunning the religious identification with any of the characters. In mythmaking, focalization is a vital narrative technique to bring out various interpretations of the known stories and myths from *the Ramayana and the Mahabharata epics*.

The first section of the chapter, "Divinity versus Humanity" introduces the politics of retellings, removing the divinity and superhuman traits from all the mythic characters as an objective approach to mythopoesis. The section elaborates on the possibilities of the two major Indian epics for nuanced interpretations. The second section establishes the necessity of making new narratives based on the existing grand narratives for contemporary society. The third section focuses on the concepts of narrative and narration with the theories of Gerard Genette and Mieke Bal. The fourth section elaborates on the features of Indian

narratology concerning the ideas developed by K Ayyappa Paniker. The fifth section describes the concept of focalization and its types with textual examples. In conclusion, it is proved that focalization is an effective narrative technique to convey the politics of the retellers undertaking mythopoesis. This chapter has shown how mythmaking is done through narration by shifting character positions. Now, the question is, “why does this particular way of narration occur in the discourse of retelling?” This shall be dealt further in the next chapter.

Chapter Four

Mythopoesis and Market

4.1. The Necessity of Mythopoesis

Mythopoesis means “creation of myths”⁴⁰. The word mythopoesis comes from the Greek word *poiein*, meaning ‘to make’ or ‘to create’. Harry Slochower, in the text *Mythopoesis: Mythic Patterns in the Literary Classics*, calls mythopoesis that which, “re-creates the ancient stories...while mythology presents its stories as if they actually took place, mythopoesis transposes a symbolic meaning” (15). Retellings taken for this study are products of mythopoesis. They have re-created the stories and characters from the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The question is, why is this happening? The original purpose of myths, according to Slochower, is to address the question of identity. He says, “By aligning himself with the high levels of the past, man gains the dignity of belonging without becoming depersonalized” (15). Mythopoesis by retellers dealt with in this research reconstructs, reimagines, and even deconstructs the past to fit the needs of the time. Along with bringing up new symbolic meanings from the existing myths, they create myths for a particular readership who would buy their products.

The meaning of myths gives the impression that they are rigid and cannot be changed because it forms the basis of most of the practices in society. The heroes and heroines in the myths are role models for the people who believe in these myths and practice rituals and customs accordingly. As Joseph Campbell says in *The Power of Myth*, “A ritual is the enactment of a myth. By participating in a ritual, you are participating in a myth”. For example, Sita is the epitome of chastity. In Hindu marriages, the most heard slogan is *Sita*

⁴⁰ Oxford English Dictionary (www.oed.com)

Kalyana videogame, *Rama Kalyana videogame* meaning, “it is the great celebration of the marriage of Sita”. Every marriage is seen as that of Rama and Sita. They are the epitomes of love (even though the later separation is overlooked). The myth of marriage suggests the union of two parted souls. As Campbell⁴¹ says, “What is marriage? The myth tells you what it is. It’s the reunion of the separated duad. Originally you were one. You are now two in the world, but the recognition of the spiritual identity is what marriage is” (Ch. 1). This is the impact of myths. Also, Krishna is the lover of all young women, even though his characteristic trait of being a politician and a tactful kingmaker is overlooked. This establishes the popularity of the mythic characters. In addition, myths influence the customs and rituals of a particular society. James Frazer has mentioned this in *The Golden Bough*.

The importance of these rituals is rejuvenated at times through different mythopoeic endeavours. Usha RK, an art consultant, says, “In today’s time, we find that the marriage ceremonies have shrunk, and the rituals are being dropped to suit the availability of time. To reiterate the importance of some rituals that are essential to the institution of marriage, this two-day dance festival was envisaged”. She attempts to bring back some rituals through her retellings in the form of dance. In general, mythopoeisis is a participatory process where the makers and the receivers contribute. As Joseph Campbell says,

I think of mythology as the homeland of the muses, the inspirers of art, the inspirers of poetry. To see life as a poem and yourself participating in a poem is what the myth does for you. [It is] a vocabulary in the form not of words but of acts and adventures, which connotes something transcendent of the action here, so that you always feel in accord with the universal being. (Ch. 2)

⁴¹ ibid

This chapter deals with contemporary mythopoesis in the discourse of retellings concerning the market factors and readership determining the nature of the narrative. It addresses the question, ‘Why retellings and mythopoesis?’

4.2. Theorists about Mythopoesis

There is a necessity for myths in any given society. Theorists of myths like Joseph Campbell, James Frazer, and Harry Slochower realize this necessity and have written extensively on this topic. Joseph Campbell and James Frazer look at the sociocultural significance of myths. Harry Slochower has a general overview of myths and the necessity to recreate, rejuvenate, and retell myths. These theoreticians accept the fact that retelling myths is a necessity. Therefore, mythopoesis is inevitable in any given society for its smooth functioning, as the definition of myth suggests. In the context of this research, it can be said that the authors of retellings in Indian English carry out this function of constant myth-making or mythopoesis. Writers of Indian epic retellings take the vision of the writers mentioned above forward in many ways. The aim of these writers is two-fold – condescending to market requirements addressing a particular readership and making political stances that would help brand them for the market. The impact of this two-fold objective is yet to be addressed in sociological terms.

Joseph Campbell’s *The Power of Myth* is a compilation of a conversation between him and Bill Moyers in 1985 and 1986. They address the question - ‘Why do we need mythology?’ According to Joseph Campbell, myths are remnants of the past that has energy in them, which we require even today. Old traditions need to be recreated and rebuilt to fit the existing circumstances. He says, “Myths are so intimately bound to the culture, time, and place that unless the symbols, the metaphors, are kept alive by constant recreation through the arts, the life just slips away from them” (Ch. 2). It is a system of belief that human beings cannot overlook. In every society, there is suffering and chaos. Campbell says, “Myths

inspire the realization of the possibility of your perfection, the fullness of your strength, and the bringing of solar light into the world” (Ch. 3). Myths help us to navigate through these inevitable conditions of life. As Campbell suggests, everything in life must be ritualized or mythologized to hold authority beyond mere coercion. He mentions the significance of the remnants of a homogenous culture even today. He says, “... in a culture that has been homogenous for some time, there are a number of understood, unwritten rules by which people live. There is an ethos there, there is a mode, an understanding that, “we don’t do it that way” (Ch. 1). No matter how much the technology develops, the need to ‘be’ cannot be addressed by that alone. It is necessary for the feeling of being alive in a demythologized world. Only these ‘stories’ can give humankind a spiritual satisfaction. He says, “Myths are clues to our deepest spiritual potential, able to lead us to delight, illumination, and even rapture” (Introduction). This same idea is discussed in Harry Slochower’s *Mythopoesis*. He says, “Every epoch has its own myth which provides the centre of its life, gives the tone, manner, and rhythm to its existence, permeates its institutions and thought, its art, science, religion, politics, its psychology, and its folkways – that is, *the myth organizes the values of its epoch*” (17).

The necessity to revive myths is not a personal thing. Myths are not only for individuals but for society as a whole. Harry Slochower says,

The perennial appeal and vitality of mythic thinking stem from the fact that it makes us feel that in all civilisations men face analogous situations, undergo similar experiences... the myth unfolds the living chain which connects the recurrent recognition scenes of the human d Rama. They assure us that we are not strangers and alone in the world. (14)

Myths help to achieve oneness with the world. The spirituality of a human being comes out of the realization that the human experience is the same everywhere. Myths help to

understand this fact. Therefore, the retellers are responsible for giving something to society, even when achieving their ulterior motives and economic, social, political, and spiritual objectives. Campbell hints at the duty of the retellers when he says, “The artist is the one who communicates myth for today. But he has to be an artist who understands mythology and humanity and isn’t simply a sociologist with a program for you” (Ch. 3). Here, he implies that the myth-makers should be committed to society, even when concerned about his ideals, agendas, and, to an extent, propaganda. Campbell points out the necessity of mythopoesis according to the needs of the time. He says,

On this immediate level of life and structure, myths offer life models. But the models have to be appropriate to the time in which you are living, and our times has changed so fast that what was proper fifty years ago is not proper today. The virtues of the past are the vices of today. And many of what were thought to be the vices of the past are the necessities of today. The moral order has to catch up with the moral necessities of actual life in time, here and now. (Ch. 1)

The necessity of mythopoesis is felt more when religion is rigidified. This rigidity of religion happens when myths that form their basis are stagnant, and interpretations are closed. For example, in the *Ramayana*, Valmiki asks Narada who is the supreme man⁴² in this world. Rama is compared to Vishnu and is considered the incarnation of Vishnu metaphorically. Campbell says, “Every religion is true one way or another. It is true when understood metaphorically. But when it gets stuck to its metaphors, interpreting them as facts, then you are in trouble” (Ch. 2). Later, Rama becomes a god in the writings of Kabir Das’s poetry and Thunchath Ezhuthachan’s *Adhyathma Ramayanam Kilippattu*. Reciting the latter in most Malayali households in *Karkitakam* (July-August) is a ritual. This divinity is an attributed quality and has problems in contemporary Indian politics. The obsession with divinity

⁴² *Maryaada Purushottam*

detaches the mind that interprets it from the state of being. As Campbell says, "...all of these wonderful poetic images of mythology refer to something in you. When your mind is simply trapped by the image out there so that you never refer to yourself, you have misread the image" (Ch. 2). People often do not realize that the divinity of Rama and Krishna was historically constructed. Sheldon Pollock, in the essay, "The Divine King in the Indian Epic" says -

The view that Rama is a divine incarnation, we are told, was not an original part of the poem but a later addition, one remaining restricted to the "attached" passages and in no way informing the entire work. The deification of Rama is attributed to a slow process of Euhemerization, whereby a hero of (quasi-historical) saga merges with a popular local divinity, the resulting demi-god finally coming to be reckoned an avatar of Visnu. But the divinity of the hero remains altogether a conception that cannot be demonstrated for the five "real" books of the poem; quite the contrary, there Rama is thoroughly human⁴³. (506)

In *The Golden Bough*, James G Frazer describes the necessity of understanding religion and its significance in people's lives. Conformity is crucial in the practice of religion, along with belief and practice. He supports the idea of subjecting oneself to the belief that it would elevate one's well-being. He says

... religion, beginning as a slight and partial acknowledgement of powers superior to man, tends with the growth of knowledge to deepen into a confession of man's entire and absolute dependence on the divine; his old free bearing is exchanged for an attitude of lowliest prostration before the mysterious powers of the unseen, and his highest virtue is to submit his will to theirs. (58-9)

⁴³ Pollock quotes H. Jacobi's *Das Ramayana*

He also explains in detail the subtle line between sciences and magic that forms the basis of myths, which, in turn, becomes the basis for religion. The retellings attempt to avoid the attribution of divinity to the mythic characters, thereby avoiding the rigidity of religion. Characters in the retellings are devoid of their divinity and superhuman qualities. In addition, some new traits are added to their personality—the flexibility of characterization points to the possibility of deconstructing rigid religious beliefs.

Rama in the *Scion of Ikshvaku* is a prince born in the Ikshvaku clan and supposedly the next Vishnu (a noble leader and not a god) in the making as planned by Vashishtha. In *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, Sita is the next Vishnu, according to Vishwamitra. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita undertakes the job of a writer who composes her story and that of other women in the epic. In *Raavan: The Enemy of Aryavarta*, Raavan is not described as a demon but a mighty king of Lanka whose efforts are responsible for its prosperity. Urmila in *Sita's Sister* is a strong feminist character questioning established stereotypical roles of women. Surpanakha in *Lanka's Princess* is the princess of Lanka who is explicit about her sexuality and a vengeful character. Ahalya in *Ahalya's Awakening* is a woman craving for knowledge and wisdom. Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka Devi, and Urmila in *The Liberation of Sita* inspire Sita to liberate herself and realize her self-worth. Bhima in *Bhima: Lone Warrior* is about Bhima's introspections and thoughts about his position as the 'second' (somewhat secondary) Pandava. The fictional character Uruvi in *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* gives an insight into the problems faced by Karna as a *sutaputra*. Satyawati in *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* is an ambitious character empowered by her sexuality. Draupadi in *Yajnaseni* undergoes spiritual enlightenment after the eventful experiences throughout her life. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi has the power to see the Kurukshetra war like Sanjaya and narrate it from her point of view. *Battle Beyond Kurukshetra* portrays an exhausted Draupadi facing several psychological challenges after the Kurukshetra war.

Contemporary mythopoesis has given rise to new heroes and heroines, and these characterizations have several social, political, and cultural significances.

Emma Dawson Varughese has written a main article elucidating the significance of contemporary mythopoesis. In the essay, “Celebrate at Home: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English and the Reception of ‘Bharati Fantasy’ in Global and Domestic Literary Markets” Varughese brings in the idea of ‘Bharati Fantasy’ a term denoting a literary genre, “which embodies the ‘unfathomable,’ ‘mythic imagination’ and the ‘mystery of human nature and the universe’ and yet, it is written in English with a popular, Indian middle-class, upwardly mobile audience, with narrative plots which might be interpreted as clinging to ‘liberal humanist verities’ (352). In short, it is a blend of Indian myths and contemporary social, political, and cultural aspects palatable for a new readership⁴⁴. It has commercial significance and does not have strict genre rules.

The works of writers like Amish Tripathi and Ashok K Banker fall into this category because entertainment is the key here. They adopt techniques that would increase the sales and demand for their brands made out of existing and familiar stories or myths. The problem with these writers is that they are not taken most of the time seriously, and their works are considered, “commercial fiction” than “literary fiction”. Their value as literature is not determined by the genre conventions but by their commercial performance in the market. As Suman Gupta⁴⁵ writes, “...commercial fiction is characterized more emphatically by market performance than the intrinsic features of texts, than the putative generic features, themes and stylistic devices that can be discerned in specific texts” (46). Amish Tripathi released book trailers for *Scion of Ikshvaku* and *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* as a part of their marketing. According to Varughese, the consumers of these texts are youngsters who want to engage

⁴⁴ Emma Dawson Varughese uses the term “Generation 3” to specify the new readership

⁴⁵ Suman Gupta’s “Indian ‘Commercial Fiction’ in English, the Publishing Industry and Youth Culture” (2012)

with Indian myths, history, and culture. In a way, the use of the Western novel genre differs in various aspects. They include characters from epics, portray the Indian landscape, and propagate Indian values and culture through their writings. Interestingly, the success of Amish Tripathi's works is compared to that of J K Rowling's Harry Potter series⁴⁶.

Arshia Sattar, in her introduction to *Valmiki's Ramayana*, describes the character of Rama as the one caught between divinity and humanity. She says Rama has an obscured identity, constantly oscillating between divinity and humanity. The divine aspect of Rama's character is unknown to Rama, and he comes to know this from others in the epic. Regarding retellings, Rama's godliness is nearly side-lined to foreground the human aspect. This is a way of removing the rigidity of the myth, thereby shunning any religious colouring. This is evident from the cover page of the novels of Amish Tripathi, in which the face of the character is occluded. In an essay⁴⁷, Emma Dawson Varughese discusses the attempt to shun a religious identification with the mythic characters rewritten by Amish Tripathi, especially Shiva and Rama. Several in-text examples prove the same argument. In *Scion of Ikshvaku*, Rama is supposed to be the Vishnu, who has to be moulded. He is not born as an incarnation of Vishnu. His father, Dasharath, hates him because of the inauspicious time of Rama's birth. Vasistha plans to make him the next Vishnu. Many processes are involved in the making of the Vishnu as described in *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, like traveling the whole country to experience the lives of common people and learning martial arts and archery (Hanuman is like an elder brother to Sita in this text. He teaches her archery), and inculcating an aptitude for knowledge. The hero or the heroine is *made* than *born*.

⁴⁶ Sunaina Kumar's "The Pied Piper of Meluha" (2013)

⁴⁷ "Seeing Shiva, Seeing Rama: Visual Representations of Deities in the Genre of Mythology-inspired Fiction, an Analysis of the Book Covers of Amish Tripathi's Novels" (2019)

Harry Slochower, in the text *Mythopoesis: Mythic Patterns in the Literary Classics*, describes the features of a mythic hero

...mythic hero is not the average, nor the common denominator of humanity. Neither is he the aristocratic individual disconnected from what is common to man. He is close to the elemental sources of life, but represents them in their higher, wider and deeper phases. In the study and “imitation” of mythic heroes ... lies the hope for the revival of creativity. (14)

This definition of a mythic hero partially befits the characters in the retellings. It is partial because characterization is similar in the epic and retellings; only their perspectives change. Incidents and events are mostly retained, except for a few. In the *Scion of Ikshvaku*, Rama is the protagonist and the focal character. In this novel, Rama is initially loathed by his father, blaming him for all the failures in Dasharath's life, especially in the battle with Raavan. Rama aspires to his father's love, like his mother, Kausalya. The latter only develops feelings for his son when he saves his father's life. Rama is shown to be yearning for his father's attention and love. The coming-of-age novel genre explains in detail why a character thinks, behaves, and acts in a particular manner in a given situation. The author prompts reading in a particular way and constructs the narrative accordingly. Therefore, mythopoesis is a necessary process for propagating rationality, and also it may be assumed that the rational readership anticipates the same, which explains the popularity of the retellings. Also, keeping the myths alive is a necessity for society. However, it does not mean that the same myth may be kept alive. Myths need to change with time. Authors of retellings take up this task. Campbell says, “Myth must be kept alive. The people who can keep it alive are artists of one kind or another. The function of the artist is the mythologization of the environment and the world” (Ch. 3).

Myths are not stories of temporary escape or instant gratification to relieve one from the suffering of life. As Campbell rightly points out, “No one with the will to the service of others would permit himself such an escape. The ultimate aim of the quest must be neither release nor ecstasy for oneself, but the wisdom and power to serve others” (Introduction) — common themes in the mythology point towards a need for profound principles that govern lives. As times change and new changes come to one’s life, myths give ground to realize oneself. Reading myths helps one to look inwards into a world where outer elements influence immensely. Campbell says, “Every mythology has to do with the wisdom of life as related to a specific culture at a specific time. It integrates the individual into his society and the society into the field of nature. It unites the field of nature with my nature. It’s a harmonizing force” (Ch. 2). Stories remain in one’s mind that helps him/her to navigate through the perils of life. The comparison of life situations and ancient stories helps one have a sense of belongingness to this world of rapid changes. This is the spiritual connection that humanity achieves through myths. They become the guidelines to realize and address inner struggles and mysteries. Myths do not inform directly. They only leave specific cues for humanity to understand their life situation. Therefore, myths and mythopoesis are always relevant. However, even when we argue about myths’ spiritual and social relevance, the utility of myths exhausted by retellers cannot be overlooked. The benefit is two-way – the reader gets to be in touch with ancient stories and myths always as they expect, and the authors of retelling achieve their motives – be it economic or political motives.

The power of myths lies in its ability to enjoy even the cruellest word. As Campbell says, Christ on the cross is appealing to people. This enjoyment is that of catharsis. Just like Aristotle realized the power of tragedy in instructing and delighting people, myths have the power to inform and instruct people about the harsh realities of life. It signifies the journey of humanity from life to death. This journey informs humankind about the mysteries of life. It

helps humankind to recognize their identity and mark their space in society. It helps them realize their agency. This agency they seek in retellings. Authors, through myths and retellings, elucidate the power of having agency in everyday life. When female characters exercise their power and recognize their individuality, the readers are informed about their power in society. Campbell explains the necessity of myths

Myths are stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance. We all need to tell our story and to understand our story. We all need to understand death and to cope with death, and we all need help in our passages from birth to life and then to death. We need for life to signify, to touch the eternal, to understand the mysterious, to find out who we are. (Ch. 1)

Not just realizing the meaning of life is enough. It is the experience that matters. The basic question that is addressed is ‘How to live?’ Myths are like dreams, according to Campbell – “They are the world’s dreams. They are archetypal dreams and deal with human problems. ...The myth tells me about it, how to respond to certain crises of disappointment or delight or failure, or success. The myth tells me where I am” (Ch.1). Anything can be done for livelihood. The readers recognize their agency and their necessities according to time through retellings. At the same time, authors reap a livelihood out of retellings, also satisfying their political needs like propagating their agenda, ideals, and perspectives.

Myths have symbolic meanings. It is like a dream – “The myth is the public dream, and the dream is the private myth” (Campbell, Ch.2). They symbolize a particular way of living required for the ‘now’. Campbell recognizes this aspect of myths when he says,

Mythology has a great deal to do with the stages of life, the initiation ceremonies as you move from childhood to adult responsibilities, from the unmarried state into the married state. All of those rituals are mythological rites. They have to do with your

recognition of the new role that you're in, the process of throwing off the old and coming out in the new, and entering into a responsible profession. (Ch. 1)

Mythic characters show a way of life. They are mythologized for a purpose that meets the needs of the time. Harry Slochower says -

The ancient stories are retold, rewritten, and transmitted as people find in them analogies to their own situation and destiny. In this sense, myth is not something invented or fancied. It is rather *a pictorial hypothesis* about the nature of man. While myths do not have existence, they enter the realm of *reality* in that they enable us to explain and predict events in the empirical world. (19)

Myths have to be retold according to the changing times. It is a necessity that the retellers make use of to propagate their ideals. The definition of myth suggests the importance of a hero's life in informing people about how to live in a society. Any hero that informs society to live according to their times becomes a mythic hero/mythologized hero. This mythologizing process could be through any medium. For example, even a movie character can have this influence. Films are an effective communication medium as they reach a broad audience quickly. Campbell gives a reason for the identification with a movie hero like this – “The person you are looking at is also somewhere else at the same time. This is a condition of the god” (Ch. 1). This explains the obsession with specific heroic figures manifested in various media. This is also one of the reasons why retellings are successful. It also establishes the significance of mythopoesis in any form and through any medium. Campbell points out the necessity to retell myths for the young generation – “The big problem of any young person's life is to have models to suggest possibilities ... Man is the animal that doesn't know what to do with itself. The mind has many possibilities, but we can live no more than one life. What are we going to do with ourselves? A living myth presents contemporary models” (Ch.3).

Campbell mentions an image of a ruler who, “must hold in one hand the weapon of war, the big stick, and in the other the peaceful sound of the song of cooperative action” (Ch.1). This general description of an ideal ruler in terms of mythology befits Vishnu, one of the holy trinities in Hinduism. This establishes the fact that myths have a universal appeal and status. However, this image of a ruler/mythic idea of a ruler is challenged/reconstructed/deconstructed in contemporary mythopoesis. In the novel, *All Lies Says Krishna*, Krishna is seen as a moribund man visiting Radha during his final days of life. He is seen as recollecting the incidents at Hastinapur and Kurukshetra war, and he justifies the actions of Shakuni, his favourite among the Kaurava allies. Also, in *Bhima: The Lone Warrior*, Krishna is a tactful kingmaker and a politician devoid of divinity or godliness. These two texts tell different stories of the *Mahabharata* from different perspectives. The character of Krishna is reconstructed in such a way as to fit into the needs of the author and the reader. As Campbell says, “We can’t have a mythology for a long, long time to come. Things are changing too fast to become mythologized” (Ch. 1). Therefore, the characters in the epic are established as authentic. When retellings talk about these historically existing characters, people are curious to see their multiple existences in different times and spaces. This is the success of retellings.

Joseph Campbell explains four significant functions of mythology – mystical, cosmological, sociological, and pedagogical. The mystical function of myths gets fulfilled if myths talk about the universe and man’s role in it. It addresses questions of individuality and existence. In the cosmological function, myths explain the universe and its features, for instance, the universe’s shape and the origin of species. In the sociological function, myths inform society about ethics and the functioning of a society. It varies with place and time. The pedagogical function of myths instructs human beings on how to live in this universe. It teaches humanity the necessary and desired qualities required to survive in a world of rapid

changes. Retellings also fulfil these functions. For example, Sita, in the novel *The Liberation of Sita*, encounters an existential crisis after her banishment from Ayodhya. She is searching for her identity and meets several female characters from the epic, like Ahalya, Surpanakha, Renuka Devi, and Urmila. Her conversations with these women aid in realizing her true self. The author, Volga, has taken a feminist point of view to elucidate this. This amounts to the mystical function of the myth retellings. In order to exemplify the cosmological function of myth, *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee can be taken. Here, Sita is said to be an expert in identifying medicinal herbs as she is obsessed with the forest. In the *Ramayana*, we do not see such an aspect of Sita. A similar trait of Sita can be seen in *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, where she is portrayed as a rational woman able to recognize the smell of *soma*.

Regarding the sociological function, Amish Tripathi is one of the finest examples. In his *Scion of Ikshvaku*, Rama, and Bharata seem to argue with each other on the subject of law and order. In the novel, *Ahalya's Awakening* by Kavita Kane, Ahalya and Gauthama discuss the idea of trust in marriage in detail. Retellings also fulfil the pedagogical function of myths. For instance, the necessity to assert one's voice during a crisis leaving aside gender stereotypical roles can be seen in *Sita's Sister*, in which Urmila vocalizes the injustice she faces. At the same time, the elders stop her from going with Lakshmana to the forest for exile. From all these instances, it can be deduced that retellings result from mythopoesis; new myths are formed to govern people's lives. As Campbell says, "A good way to learn is to find a book that seems to be dealing with the problems that you're now dealing with" (Ch.3). The discourse of retellings and contemporary mythopoesis informs society's social, political, and cultural situation today.

4.3. New Myths for the Market

Writers of retellings have retold myths by positioning various characters from the epic for social, political, cultural, and economic reasons. The traits of mythic characters have been changed along with the plotting. Comparing characters from the ‘original’ texts with those from retellings is necessary to understand the process of mythopoesis. Characters analyzed for this study are Rama, Sita, Raavan, Surpanakha, Ahalya, and Renuka Devi from the *Ramayana* and Satyawati, Bhima, Draupadi, Karna, and Uruvi from the *Mahabharata*.

4.3.1 The *Ramayana* and its Retellings

In the *Ramayana*, Rama is the beloved son of Dasharath. He is described as, “Desirous of doing that which would be acceptable to subject, king Daçarātha, from fulness of affection, wished to install as his associate in the kingdom his beloved and meritorious eldest son, Rāma, of infallible prowess, and endued with sterling virtues, and ever intent on the welfare of the people” (Section I, *Bālakāndam*). But in the novel *Scion of Ikshvaku*, Dasarath hates Rama first because of his loss in the battle with Raavan –

Emperor Dashrath had blamed him for the horrific defeat he’d suffered at the hands of Raavan, on the day that Ram was born. Till that fateful day, he had never lost a battle; in fact, he’d been the only unbeaten ruler in all of India. Dashrath was convinced that Ram was born with bad karma and his birth was the undoing of the noble lineage of Raghu. (42)

In the trajectory of Sita’s liberation in *The Liberation of Sita*, she places Rama in an antagonistic position. In the final chapter of the text, Rama is shown to be guilty and realizes his mistakes in life. This uplifts the feminist narrative. When Sita ascends to her liberation, Rama descends to guilt. In *Uttarakāndam*, Rama’s grief is shown from an omniscient narrator’s view - “Sitā having entered Patala by the strength of her vow, and the sacrifice having terminated, Rāma grew poorly in spirit. In Jānaki’s absence the whole world appeared to him as blank. Now being overwhelmed with grief he lost all mental peace” (Section CXII).

Here, only the grief of Rama is explained. However, in the retelling, the technique of internal focalization reveals more about Rama's repentance and his guilt-stricken conscience. Rama in *The Liberation of Sita* is portrayed as a person who unwillingly accepted *dharma* -

That very sense of duty was now slipping from Rama's throat into his heart. It tasted like poison.

...

Unless Rama swallowed the poison, the world would not prosper, they said.

Rama swallowed.

Torture. Unbearable suffering.

Loneliness, terrible loneliness. (74)

The stoic nature of Rama is changed to a grief-stricken human being in the retellings.

According to the character of Rama in this retelling, duty is imposed on him. This is a way of removing the godliness of the character. At the same time, Sita becomes a strong character.

The new myth foregrounded here is that of a strong woman with self-respect who recognizes individuality's power in deciding her own life. Through Rama, Sita's strength is revealed. At the same time, the effect of the imposition of stereotypical roles on any gender is challenged. Rama is also a victim of the reinforcing stereotype of a *dharmic* king.

In the *Ramayana*, Sita is silent when her father fixes the criteria of her marriage in the *Bālakāṇḍam*. Her nature is only visible to the reader through the description of her father, Janaka, in this part and not through her deeds or words -

O worshipful one, I have beheld the prowess of Daṣarātha's son. This is verily wonderful and inconceivable; and I did not think this was possible. And my daughter, Sitā, being united with her lord, Daṣarātha's son, Rāma, will shed lustre on Janaka's line. And my promise viz., that I will confer Sitā upon him that will bend the bow,

hath been fulfilled, O son of Kuçika. And this Sitā, this my daughter, dearer unto me than life will I confer upon Rāma. (Section LXVII, *Bālakāndam*)

On the other hand, in the text, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, she decides the criteria of her marriage, and the *swayamvara* is her idea. Also, she is the next Vishnu in search of a partner to carry forward the Vishnu mission. It was Sita who sent Vishwamitra to Ayodhya to bring Rama. She also trains Rama secretly to lift the bow of Shiva. In addition, the description of Sita in the novel is that of a warrior with battle scars all over her body. She is also an aggressive, adventurous, and learned woman. An instance of her talent, as well as aggression, is described in the novel -

While the ten-year-old student had impressed her guru with her intelligence and sharpness, it was her enthusiasm for the outdoors that was truly extraordinary. Especially noteworthy was her skill in stick-fighting. (37)

Nevertheless, her spirited temperament also created problems on occasion. Like the time when a fellow student had called her father an intellectual king, more suited to being a teacher than a ruler. Sita's response had been to thrash the living daylights out of him. (44)

In the *Bālakāndam*, she is described as 'the daughter of the celestial', 'beloved', and 'lotus-eyed'. However, in the novel *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, she is 'intelligent', 'sharp', and 'spirited'. Sita's mother in the *Ramayana* is said to be Earth because she was found on soil. In the retellings, her mother is only Sunaina. In the novel *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, Sunaina rules Mithila as a regent because Janaka is into philosophy, not politics – "Janak, a devout and spiritual man, had adopted a philosophical approach to his kingdom's decline in fortune. But the new queen, Sunaina, who had married Janak two years earlier, was not the idle sort. She planned to restore Mithila to its old glory" (15). Installing a solid mother figure inspiring the daughter into the narrative is a new mythopoesis upholding feminist ideal.

Sita is enthusiastic about learning new things. She learns archery from Hanuman in this text, who is portrayed as an elder brother to Sita, unlike Hanuman in the *Ramayana*, who is the humble devotee of Rama. Therefore, the myth of Sita as a meek and calm woman obeying the code of conduct expected of a woman in society is deconstructed in this text. She is portrayed as a capable leader who would carry the Vishnu mission establishing *dharma*. Similar strengths of Sita's character could be seen in the text *The Forest of Enchantments*. There she is restricted from learning martial arts – “My martial arts lessons, which I loved, were secret because my father abhorred violence of any kind, even when it was necessary” (9). Here, the author asserts the necessity of making women self-protective through the myth of Sita.

Sita's love of the forest is mentioned in the *Ramayana*, but her obsession with the serenity of the forest is described in the text *The Forest of Enchantments*. Sita yearns for a return to the forest in this novel. Also, it is a haven for her compared to cities. In the *Bālakāṇḍam*, Rama tries to dissuade Sita from accompanying him to the forest, citing the dangers there –

Oh Sitā, Oh thou of the weaker sex, do thou act up to my counsels; there are evils enough in the forest, do thou learn them from me who am about to dwell in it.

Renounce therefore. Oh Sitā, thy intention of flying as an exile unto the forest, which for its impenetrableness is said to abound in evils. It is for thy welfare that I give utterance to these words; happiness there is none, it is always covered with miseries.

(Section XXVIII, *Bālakāṇḍam*)

Here, Rama addresses her as ‘the weaker sex’. Nevertheless, in the retellings, she emerges as a strong female character. Her love of forest is exemplified in *The Liberation of Sita*, where she compares the garden of Surpanakha with the forest of Ashoka in Lanka. This indicates that she found solace in the forest of Ashoka when she was captivated and held refuge there.

In the novel *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita is shown as having an aptitude for medicinal plants establishing her bonding with the forest -

My strange gift with plants was a mystery to me. Perhaps it was because, like them, I was earth-born. Maybe for the same reason, when I touched a plant, I knew its healing properties. I could tell which grasses cured headaches and colds, which seeds fended off infections, which herbs to give women when their monthly blood flowed too long, and which potions healed the shaking sickness or gladdened a long-depressed heart.

(7)

Here, Sita is an expert in identifying medicinal herbs. Moreover, she is explicitly talking about menstrual blood and its cure. Nowhere in the *Ramayana* can one find such a description of Sita. This new myth hints at the return to nature from the rigidity of civilization.

Sita believes in love in this novel but later recognizes the futility of emotions compared to severe matters like duty and responsibility. In the *Ramayana*, Sita is viewed as a fortunate woman to receive Rama's love and be under his protection – "Those ladies thought that Sitā, the captivator of Rāma's heart was surely the best of all women and for certain had she performed some great austerities in her past life or else she would not have been the companion of Rāma, like unto Rohini, the companion of Moon" (Section XVI, *Bālakāṇḍam*). Even Sita earnestly admits that she cannot live without Rama – "I shall follow thee, taking the permission of the respected ones; without thee, O Rāma, I will renounce my life. If I live by thee, O Rāghava, Sakra, the lord of celestials, shall not be able with his mighty power to defeat me. 'A woman, without her husband, cannot live'; this truth has been pointed out by thee, O Rāma, unto me" (Section XXIX, *Bālakāṇḍam*). However, she is free of these weaknesses in the novels *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, *The Forest of Enchantment*, and *The Liberation of Sita*. In the first novel, Sita is seen to be fighting her kidnappers until she is

captured by shock inflicted by the breach of trust by her friend Samichi. In the second and third texts, she peacefully describes *paatal* as noble, forgiving, and respectful. Other female characters in the *Ramayana* are also on the same path – rejecting disrespectful and lovelorn married life and embracing the self. This is the new myth conveyed here.

Two other female characters – Renuka Devi and Ahalya – assert this fact. There is no mention of the name Renuka Devi in the *Ramayana*, but her beheading is mentioned in the *Bālakāṇḍam*, that too, to justify the significance of the father’s commands -

Rāma the son of Jāmadagni, at his father’s words, decapitated his mother in the forest. These and other god-like personages, Oh worshipful one, obeyed heroically the orders of their father; and I shall do my father’s welfare therefore. It is not I alone who am carrying out my father’s commands; those whom I have mentioned now, O worshipful one, have done so. I am not introducing some such righteousness, unfavourable unto thee, that has been never practised before. I am simply treading the path, that has been upheld and followed by worthies gone before. Surely shall I accomplish that which is worthy of being performed in this world and nothing else—one going by his father’s behests is not certainly degraded. (Section XXI, *Bālakāṇḍam*)

The decapitation of the mother’s head is considered a noble deed if the father commands it. In *The Liberation of Sita*, Renuka Devi questions this patriarchal notion and moulds her into a great artist good at pottery. Her myth is reconstructed to explain the insanity of certain patriarchal norms. Ahalya also undergoes a similar plight for her breach of chastity.

And perceiving occasion, Sachi’s lord, the thousand-eyed deity, assuming the form of that ascetic thus addressed Ahalyā, — ‘O exceedingly beautiful one, those bent upon sport, do not stay for the menstrual season. And, O graceful one, I desire to enjoy thy company (on the instant). Thereupon, out of curiosity, that one of perverse

understanding consented to the proposals of the chief of the celestials. Then, having attained her object, she spoke unto that foremost of the celestials, saying. —’ O best of the immortals, I have obtained my desire, —do thou speedily go from his place, O lord. Do thou, O lord of the celestials, from a sense of respectability preserve thyself and me also.’ Indra too smiling, said unto Ahalyā, —’ O thou of shapely hips, pleased am I. Now I repair unto my own place. (Section XLVIII, *Bālakāṇḍam*)

Ahalya does not rage against Indra for having sex with her without consent. Instead, she bows down to him because he is a celestial being. Eventually, she is cursed by her husband, Rishi Gautama. However, in *The Liberation of Sita*, she does not explicitly say whether she knew it was Indra but confirms it in *Ahalya’s Awakening*. Through this, she questions the dogma of female chastity and trusts in marriage. Through Ahalya and Renuka Devi, authors create a new myth about women walking out of marriage.

Urmila is a silent character in the *Ramayana*. She is also given into marriage to Lakshmana without her consent by the sole decision of her father – “Having thus given away his daughter Sitā, with water and mantras, king Janaka overflowing with delight, said, — Come forward, O Lakshmana, good unto thee. Receive thou Urmilā ready to be bestowed by me upon thee. Do thou accept her hand: let there be no delay about it” (Section LXXII, *Bālakāṇḍa*). However, Urmila is portrayed as a learned and strong woman falling in love with Lakshmana and is shown as questioning the rigid rules against women. In *The Liberation of Sita*, a scene where Sita meets Urmila after fourteen years of exile evokes suspense. Sita notices a drastic change in Urmila’s nature – “Sita was shocked for a moment. This was not the Urmila she knew. There was innocence in those eyes earlier. Some royal haughtiness too. Her stately mien was that of a queen. What was it that glowed in those eyes? There was a rare poise and dignity in the way she carried herself. What was that radiance in her face?” (65).

The reader is addressed through a conversation between Urmila and Sita in *The Liberation of Sita* - “Do not allow the situation to force you into mundaneness, into nastiness. Do not let it burn you up in anger, hatred. Save yourself. Assert your right over yourself. Give up your power over others. Then you will belong to yourself. You will be yourself. It’s not easy to remain ourselves...” (69). Here, Urmila motivates Sita to recognize her power. In *Sita’s Sister*, Urmila is a different character. She is earnest about gaining knowledge and exploring the world, but familial and societal rules stop her. However, she is shown as dissenting against all these. However, her father, Janak, motivates her to learn more. She is not overpowered by emotions here – “She was Urmila, not just the woman of passion as her name so defined her but one whose heart and mind had come together in intellectual and spiritual enrichment” (269). Urmila is shown as questioning even Kausalya in the same text, who is portrayed as engulfed by anger and a victim of patriarchy trying to propagate the same. Also, Urmila is the opposite of her sister Mandavi, the wife of Bharata. While Urmila can manage the absence of her husband, Mandavi is not – “Mandavi had been completely disheartened by Bharat’s decision, slipping into a state of melancholia the moment Bharat left for Nandigram. [...] Urmila did not know what exactly had happened between them. Since that day, Mandavi had simply kept disconcertingly silent, sealing her lips and herself from the world outside” (227). Here, the author focuses on Urmila and foreshadows other female characters to foreground the ideals conveyed through one character. This new myth about Urmila and other characters acting as a foil for her is a technique of inviting attention to the politics she puts forth from the focal point of a single female character. A similar characterization pattern could be seen in the other works of Kavita Kane.

Surpanakha in *Lanka’s Princess* is yet another different portrayal by Kavita Kane. She positions Surpanakha as the focal character and propagates her feminist ideals. The first and foremost idea is recognizing female sexuality. Also, she is portrayed as a vengeful

character but changes later. She seeks revenge on Lakshmana for killing her son and on Raavan for getting her husband, Vidyuja, killed on the battlefield. However, she realizes her mistakes and attains salvation. In the *Āraṇya Kāṇḍam*, Surpanakha gazes at Rama, and his beauty is described there. Also, she is described as a *rakshasi* and the sister of the *rakshasa* Raavan –

And that one named Surpanakhā, sister unto the ten-necked Rākshasa, coming upon Rāma, saw him like a celestial, having a leonine chest, mighty-arms, and expansive eyes resembling lotus leaves, with the powerful gait of the elephant, wearing a head of matted locks, with a resplendent countenance, bearing regal marks. And beholding Rāma dark-blue like the lotus, and becoming like Kandarpa himself, and resembling Indra, the Rākshasi was maddened with desire. (Section XVII, *Āraṇya Kāṇḍam*)

However, in the novel *Lanka's Princess*, Surpanakha's beauty and the gaze of Rama and Lakshmana are described. This shift in gaze asserts the dominant characteristics of Surpanakha and the power of the female body -

She approached them with a suggestive sway of her flaring hips, walking with confidence and purported friendliness. She saw them quickly straightening themselves up, fully aware that the two men were eyeing her, their eyes taking in her appearance: the angavastra draped casually over her slim, bare shoulders, revealing the top of her cleavage; the thick hair hanging loose till her slender waist and the sari knotted seductively low at the generous hips. She saw that their eyes appraised what they looked at, but she wanted more than the casual appraisal. As she approached them, they quickly shifted their eyes. (196)

The description of her appearance in the novel removes the *rakshasi* image. She is portrayed as an attractive woman, even seducing Rama and Lakshmana. However, she uses her sexuality for vengeance. Surpanakha's character is jealous of Sita because Rama loves her.

Similarly, she gets angry with Lakshmana for his true love for Urmila. As Surpanakha is lovelorn after her husband's death, she is short-tempered when love comes before her. Also, she wanted to seduce these men to accuse them falsely of molesting her so that her brother would wage war against them. However, her wish is not fulfilled, and she gets maimed instead. Towards the end of her novel, she changes her attitude and recognizes the strength of peace and happiness within a mind devoid of uncontrolled anger and vengeance. This Surpanakha can be seen in another text, *The Liberation of Sita*, which has recognized the importance of inner beauty and the goodness of labour for the happiness of the self. Here, she influences Sita with her polished self. Therefore, the myth of Surpanakha as an evil demonic woman gets deconstructed, and she becomes a human being who realizes the power of controlled negative thoughts and the power of her femininity.

Amish Tripathi uses the technique of cliff-hangers⁴⁸ in his series, making the readership curious and forced to buy the texts as they arrive. He uses the multilinear narrative style to give continuity to his texts. The first book in the *Ramchandra Series*, *Scion of Ikshvaku*, ends like this – “With his dying breaths, Jatayu whispered, ‘Get ... her back ... I ... failed ... She’s important ... Lady Sita ... must be saved ... Lady Sita ... must be saved ... Vishnu ... Lady Sita ...’” (354). Words of the dying Jatayu and the deliberate obscurity created by using ellipses set a dramatic environment evoking curiosity. From these words, the reader gets a hint that Sita is the Vishnu whom Jatayu was supposed to protect. Similarly, in the second book of this series, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, where she is revealed to be the next Vishnu, as hinted in the first book, there is a cliff-hanger. Here, Sita is kidnapped by her childhood friend Samichi which shocks Sita, and the reason is unknown to Sita and the readers -

⁴⁸ “A tense or dramatic ending to an episode of a series of films, television programmes, books, etc., which leaves the audience in suspense and anxious to discover what will happen next; (also) a work or series which regularly uses or is characterized by such endings” – *Oxford English Dictionary* (www.oed.com)

Willing breaths into her body, she looked again at the face of her attacker. The one who had wanted to kill her a few moments ago. The one who obviously had strong emotions for Khara. The one who obviously was under the complete control of Raavan.

The one who had saved her life once ...

The one she had thought was her friend.

Samichi. (361)

Sita's mental stress and shock are evident from the repeated and dramatic use of the phrase, "the one who". Samichi's anger towards Sita is explained only in the third book *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*.

In the novel *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*, Raavan is portrayed as a man in love with a character named Vedavati (initially a Kanyakumari). In the *Ramayana*, she is said to be outraged by Raavan -

Know thou that thy fear cometh from a human being. Thou art incapable of being slain by deities and Dānavas, Gandharvas, Yakshas, Rākshasas and serpents. But thou hast not asked for immunity from men.' And I deem even this son of Daçaratha as the occasion of my fear. And was formerly cursed by that lord of the Ikshwaku line—Anaranya—saying, —' O worst of Rākshasas, a person shall spring in my race, who, O wicked-minded one, shall slay thee in battle along with thy sons and courtiers and forces and horses and charioteers.' And I was also cursed by Vedavati, who was formerly outraged by me. And she is (perchance) born as the exalted daughter of Janaka. (Section LX, *Yuddhakāṇḍam*)

He remembers the curse he received in his life. However, in the novel, he becomes ruthless because the people of Sapt Sindhu killed her, and he vows revenge. This episode is not mentioned in the *Ramayana*. This fictional narrative deviates from the text solely to create a

dramatic narrative evoking suspense. The reason for Vishwamitra anointing Sita as the next Vishnu is revealed. She is said to be the daughter of Vedavati, and Raavan would hesitate to kill her. The novel ends with an ensuing war that will be described in the next novel of the series. The author has deliberately removed the villainous nature of Raavan and placed him as the focal character, mainly because he wanted the Rama-Raavan binary to work in the next novel. This mythopoesis increases the saleability of his product.

4.3.2. The *Mahabharata* and its Retellings

The plots of the *Mahabharata* retellings are similar to the original epic. But, there is a difference in characterization. The *Ramayana* focuses on Rama, and other characters are secondary. But in the *Mahabharata*, there is no single primary character. Retellings go deeper into the inner conflicts of some of the characters in the epic.

Karna is described as ‘invincible in battle’. He is a great warrior well-versed in using various complex weapons. He is known for his munificence and selflessness after he gave away his protective earrings and natural armour. Karna is often cheated and discriminated against because of his low birth. He is vengeful towards the Pandavas mainly because Kripa and Bhima insulted him during the exhibition of talents at Hastinapur. In *Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen*, Uruvi, a fictional character not mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, is Karna’s wife. The author exhibits the conflicts within Karna, Kunti, and Draupadi through her. In *Adi Parva*, during the Tournament at Hastinapur, Kripa questions Karna about his lineage for the duel between Arjuna and Karna -

This Pandava, who is the youngest son of Kunti, belongeth to the Kaurava race: he will engage in combat with thee. But, O mighty-armed one, thou too must tell us thy lineage and the names of thy father and mother and the royal line of which thou art the ornament. Learning all this, Partha will fight with thee or not (as he will think fit). Sons of kings never fight with men of inglorious lineage. (Section 138, *Adi Parva*)

Karna is insulted. Immediately after this, Duryodhana bestows Karna the title, “King of Anga” to elevate his status. His foster father, Athiratha, arrives at the Tournament ground. He is a charioteer, considered as a person of low birth. Thus, he is once again insulted by Bhima in an unscrupulous manner -

Seeing the charioteer, the Pandava Bhimasena took Karna for a charioteer’s son, and said by way of ridicule, ‘O son of a charioteer, thou dost not deserve death in fight at the hands of Partha. As befits thy race take, thou anon the whip. And, O worst of mortals, surely, thou art not worthy to sway the kingdom of Anga, even as a dog doth not deserve the butter placed before the sacrificial fire’. (Section 139, *Adi Parva*)

When this incident is described in *Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen*, Uruvi sees Kunti fainting after she sees Karna. It is a dramatic situation pointing at the guilt of Kunti, who realizes that Karna is her son whom she abandoned. But this is revealed only later in the novel. The situation is described like this –

‘Who’s he?’ Uruvi excitedly turned to the Pandava queen, who looked unexpectedly ashen and seemed to stiffen at her question. [...] There was no reply and Uruvi saw to her growing horror that Kunti had crumpled into a quiet faint. [...] ‘It must have been the heat,’ murmured Kunti through parched lips, gathering her silken folds and her dignity quickly. (3)

Here, the author exposes Kunti’s guilt through Uruvi. ‘Who’s he?’ is Kunti’s question to herself, and the immediate realization weakens her. The sentence, “It must have been the heat” means two things – either the heat of guilt or she indirectly means the Sun (god), Karna’s biological father, in the epic. Here, Kunti is portrayed as a normal human being guilt-ridden for a mistake she committed during her adolescence. Uruvi reinforces this guilt after Karna’s death – “First, at his very birth, his mother disowned him, keeping her honour above the self-respect of her first-born child. As a young, unwed mother, she cast him into the river,

forsaking him and leaving him to a certain death. Karna was killed the day he was born. And he died each time his mother refused to acknowledge him” (299).

In addition, the character of Uruvi exposes Karna’s mental struggle after killing Abhimanyu.

Uruvi gazed at her husband. His face was ghostly in its pallor, his eyes bleak. She asked herself what torment he must be going through. His hopes had been destroyed, and despair had broken his spirit.

Karna did not look at her. His vacant eyes rested on the distant battlefield in the still of the moonless night. He was a crushed man, a still figure in his silent, heart breaking anguish. He made no protest and showed no resentment. He seemed to accept life’s stinging blow as the ordinary course. Life had extracted everything from him, shredded him limb from limb, and then hurled him cruelly on a blood-soaked battlefield. (273)

A repenting Karna is portrayed here, unlike in the epic. In the same way, Uruvi exposes Draupadi’s feelings for Karna, even though in the *Mahabharata*, she insulted and rejected his victory at her *swayamvara* for his low birth -

And beholding the son of Surya--Karna of the Suta tribe--like unto fire, or Soma, or Surya himself, resolved to shoot the mark, those foremost of bowmen--the sons of Pandu--regarded the mark as already shot and brought down upon the ground. But seeing Karna, Draupadi loudly said, ‘I will not select a Suta for my lord.’ Then Karna, laughing in vexation and casting glance at the Sun, threw aside the bow already drawn to a circle. (Section 189, “Swayamvara Parva”, *Sabha Parva*)

Uruvi sees Draupadi looking tenderly at Karna during a ritual, which confuses the former. This incident shows that Draupadi liked Karna. She is said to have forsaken her love for two reasons – her father’s desire to marry her to Arjuna for political gains and to save her

brother's life, who was supposed to have a duel with Karna. A similar justification is provided by Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee in *The Palace of Illusions*. However, Uruvi's thoughts reveal Draupadi's love -

Human nature is odd; the emotion called love odder still. Was Draupadi's love for Karna so great that she could absolve him so easily? O was it that Draupadi's love was greater and more large-hearted than hers? ...Was her love for Karna so feeble, so frail that unlike Vrushali and Draupadi, she could not forgive his faults? Did Draupadi love Karna so selflessly that she lost her sense of self so completely? (134)

In *Yajnaseni*, Draupadi makes a last wish for the common good of women. She says, "The first thing I ask for – O Krishna Vasudev! Whatever has happened in my life – let it not be repeated in the life of any other women. Lay down a rule that no woman will ever have several husbands at a time. Keeping myself indivisible, the pain of being divided is known to me" (395-6). Here, Draupadi asserts that her choice was a single husband, but that is not fulfilled. In this novel also, Draupadi is attracted to Karna and is haunted by his thoughts -

I was a woman. What was my fault in this? I was beautiful. How could I be blamed for that? Arjun won me. In this what was my crime? Karna did not win me – in this was I blameless? I did not know the answer to that question. All the blame accumulated and fell on me at this last question. Yet, was it not unjust on Karna's part to torment me throughout life? (305)

In *Battle Beyond Kurukshetra*, a psychologically tormented Draupadi is portrayed differently from the other narratives. In this text, she ponders about her life so far. Motivated by anger and vengeance, she desires war against the Kauravas. After the war, she is tortured by the scale of bloodshed, which makes her guilty. Also, the realization that Karna is the elder brother of the Pandavas intensifies her grief. Discrimination and deprivation faced by Karna are disclosed through the thoughts of Draupadi. She is sleep-deprived and consumed by

regret. Later, she realizes the futility of all emotions and the power of spiritual recognition of one's self, which helps her sleep -

As she learns more of his life and actions, her pride in the valour of her husbands slowly erodes. The pride and glory that had sustained her in life and were the bedrock of existence dissipates. Life as she had understood it loses all its purpose and meaning. She realizes that her actions out of anger and vengeance had ultimately turned back on her. In the bland emptiness, life moves beyond all meaning and meaninglessness. (190)

Authors focusing on Karna attempt to redeem his tragic flaw of blind anger through their justificatory narratives, creating a new myth about Karna. They have given an in-depth narrative about the issues of caste struggle and the loss of love to justify Karna's unjust deeds of siding with the Kauravas.

Satyavati is the daughter of King Vasu, born and the *apsara* Adrika, and the mother of Veda Vyasa, according to the original myth. The latter is cursed to be a fish, and she is released from her curse after she gives birth to Satyavati. As she is born from a fish, she is called Matsyagandha – the woman who smells like a fish. She begets a boon from Rishi Parashar -

And Satyavati gratified with having obtained the excellent boon in consequence of which she became sweet-scented, and her virginity remained unsullied conceived through Parasara's embraces. And she brought forth the very day, on an island in the Yamuna, the child begot upon her by Parasara and gifted with great energy. And the child, with the permission of his mother, set his mind on asceticism. And he went away saying, 'As soon as thou rememberest me when occasion comes, I shall appear unto thee'. And it was thus that Vyasa was born of Satyavati through Parasara.

(Section 63, *Adi Parva*)

The Fisher Queen's Dynasty, with Satyavati as the protagonist, elaborates on this episode and her marriage to King Shantanu. Her inner conflicts, turmoils, and desires are detailed in length. She is a strong female character who gives rise to a dynasty that would kill each other later. Here, Bhishma seems to blame Satyavati for the fall of the Kuru dynasty. Even Bhishma, the one that took the terrible vow, could not resist the power of Satyavati on many occasions. In the *Mahabharata*, she politely accepts Parashar's wish but expresses her concern, leading to the boon – "O holy one, note that I am a maiden under the control of my father. O sinless one, by accepting your embraces my virginity will be sullied. O best of Brahmanas, my virginity being sullied, how shall I, O Rishi, be able to return home? Indeed, I shall not then be able to bear life" (Section 63, *Adi Parva*). In *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, she is confused about her future, but she decides to reap benefit from Parashar's weakness – "She eyed him sceptically. What would it be like making love to a mighty rishi? *Menaka had given birth to Shakuntala. After being with the powerful rishi, Vishwamitra*, she thought dazedly, as she watched the young seer get up. *What would this rishi give me?* She shivered in anticipation" (16).

She recollects the story of Shakuntala's birth mainly because the latter becomes Dushyanta's wife giving rise to the Bharata dynasty. She anticipates a similar feat. This shows her craving for power, exemplified in many other episodes in the narrative. Shantanu in the *Mahabharata* meets Satyavati's father to ask her for marriage –

'Who art thou, and whose daughter? What dost thou do here, O timid one?' She answered, 'Blest be thou! I am the daughter of the chief of the fishermen. At his command, I am engaged for religious merit, in rowing passengers across this river in my boat.' And Santanu, beholding that maiden of celestial form endued with beauty, amiableness, and such fragrance, desired her for his wife. (Section 100, *Adi Parva*)

But in the novel, he proposes Satyavati directly, and her thoughts are described –

Do I want him, she asked herself as her eyes shrewdly took in the grey hair, the finely lined face, and the dry, shriveling skin on his hands. *Am I ready to give my girlhood to this old man and sacrifice my youth for security? I could be a young queen to an old king...*

[...] She would not allow ambition to be a dirty word. It would cleanse her, empower her and be the cause of her rebirth. She was sick of poverty; it made her ill. She needed a cure; she wanted wealth, which was power. She wanted power, too. (59-60)

Her ambitions motivate her to be the queen of Hastinapur. However, her obsession with power culminated in creating a dynasty that would later annihilate itself. Through Satyawati, the author creates a new myth about a woman who uses her beauty and sexuality meticulously to reach her goals. She takes responsibility for her life, unlike the Satyawati in the *Mahabharata*.

Bhima in *Bhima: Lone Warrior* is a character who thinks deeply about his status as the second (or secondary) Pandava. He is portrayed as a discriminated character. As a person who has faced discrimination, Bhima, in this text, views everything from a subaltern perspective. The author creates a new myth about Bhima to point out the problems of class and caste. For instance, he asks Yudhishtira about Vidura's sons learning separately. Yudhishtira says that they are shudras. Bhima insulting Karna is justified in this text because Karna joins Duryodhana and Dushasana in their attempts to drown Bhima to death. Bhima is a vengeful character. He vows the destruction of the Kauravas in both the *Mahabharata* and the novel -

And beholding this insult offered to him, the mighty and proud Bhima, suppressing his rising rage and following the steps of Yudhishtira, also spoke these words while going out of the Kaurava court, 'I will slay Duryodhana, and Dhananjaya will slay Karna, and Sahadeva will slay Sakuni that gambler with dice. I also repeat in this

assembly these proud words which the gods will assuredly make good, if ever we engage in battle with the Kurus, I will slay this wretched Duryodhana in battle with my mace, and prostrating him on the ground I will place my foot on his head. And as regards this (other) wicked person-- Dussasana who is audacious in speech, I will drink his blood like a lion'. (Section 76, "Anudyuta Parva", *Sabha Parva*)

However, he takes this vow of revenge because of his love for Draupadi. He kills Keechaka, renounces kingship, and vows to protect Arjuna in the war, mainly for Draupadi. Bhima tends to the fallen Draupadi when she falls between their *svargarohana* (ascending heaven). In the *Mahabharata*, he also falls on their way to heaven; in the novel, he returns to the forest searching for Hidimbi. Towards the end of the novel, Kunti reveals that he is the son of a hunter. Like Draupadi and Sita, Bhima also finds solace in the forest. This new myth about Bhima shows the problems of civilization that force a man to return to the forest as a part of redemption.

4.4. The New Readership

The nature of readership could be deduced from the popularity of the retellings. The 'original' epics were in Sanskrit, known as the *Deva-Vani*⁴⁹ 'language of the gods', once inaccessible to common people. The retellings selected for the study are in English, once a colonial language used for subjugation. However, today, the writers use the same colonial language to popularise the stories of Sanskrit epics palatable for readers interested to know about their past, culture, and values. Therefore, there is a transition from one dominant language to another in the retelling genre. The dominant status is attributed to English only because of its origin in India from colonial rule. Like Sanskrit used as the court language and that of the elite during the Gupta period, English was the language of the oppressing colonial rulers. However, compared to Sanskrit, English was more accessible to the underprivileged

⁴⁹ Entry by Nikul Joshi in the *World History Encyclopaedia* on August 22, 2016

sections of the society. S Anand⁵⁰ writes, “Unlike Sanskrit, there are no scriptural injunctions against the learning of English; English is theoretically as accessible to dalits and women as it is to the ‘dwijas’” (2053). English is not a sacred language in comparison to Sanskrit. This is also one of the reasons why the retellers use English to avoid the divinity of the characters and get rid of religious rigidity.

The dominant status of the English language has also changed due to technological advancements, and English is the *lingua franca* due to globalization and liberalization. The Official Language Act of 1963 recognizes the use of English for official purposes. As Emma Dawson Varughese mentions in her essay⁵¹, merely knowing English will not be sufficient to read Indian English writings talking about Indianness -

Although literacy skills, the recognition of graphemes and their phoneme counterparts, the understanding of syntax, grammar and semantics are all essential for reading to take place, the ability to cognitively process what we read and to culturally process and interpret what we read is as important, as essential. A text cannot mean much without its social and cultural content—at its very base, its human content or its relation to humanity—and this is particularly noteworthy in relation to Indian fiction in English where the language medium is familiar yet the content, less so. (355)

The readership is familiar with the old narratives, characters, and myths. This is why the retellings based on them are very popular. The advent of colour television is one of the major reasons for the popularity of epic narratives. Satya P Sharma⁵² traces this history -

Colour television came to India in 1982 when New Delhi hosted the Asian games.

The increasing reach of television, along with advertisements that came along, made

⁵⁰ S Anand’s “Sanskrit, English and Dalits” (1999)

⁵¹ Emma Dawson Varughese’s “Celebrate at Home: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English and the Reception of ‘Bharati Fantasy’ in Global and Domestic Literary Markets” (2014)

⁵² Satya P Sharma’s “The Cultural Costs of a Globalized Economy for India” (1996)

the consumers aware of the range of goods they could buy. Until 1992, Indians were restricted to the state-owned television, called Doordarshan, still the country's only terrestrial broadcaster. The most exciting program it ever produced was a 98-part serial dramatization of the religious epic, the Mahabharata. (303)

Hence, myths and mythic characters are always present around the readers. The first telecast of the television series *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* was from 1987 to 1989. Then it was welcomed with great excitement, and people did not even step out or organize any event when it was screened. During the COVID pandemic, the two series were screened again on March 28 as per the decision by Prakash Javadekar, the Minister of Information and Broadcasting. This has once again popularised the epic among Indian audiences. Ritika Pant⁵³, in an article in the *EPW*, explores the impact of this decision by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. She reports the statistics of viewership for the re-telecast -

According to the data released by Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC), 51 million viewers tuned into Doordarshan to watch *Ramayan*, the highest ever figure for Hindi general entertainment genre since 2015 (*Financial Express* 2020b). As per news websites, Doordarshan registered a 650% growth in its viewership within a week and became the most-watched channel across India (*India Today* 2020). (3)

The popularity of these TV shows was said to be one of the determining factors in Indian politics. The Rama Janmabhoomi Movement that began in 1989 and culminated in the Babri Masjid demolition was some of the aftermaths. According to Pant, the Bharatiya Janata Party gained political mileage as a combined result of all these events. Political scenarios like this assert the significance of myths. The readership of retellings, in that sense, might be familiar with these incidents that contribute to the popularity of retellings. A new rendering of these

⁵³ "Television's New Lease of Life Amidst COVID-19" (2021)

familiar narratives compels readers to buy these texts motivated by history and cultural heritage. In addition, the technology group, or the tech-savvy group, gets to know instantly about the new arrivals because of the marketing techniques like launching book trailers through YouTube channels.

Another aspect of the readership is that they are primarily English-educated Indians and the Indian diaspora mainly. However, the readers abroad must be noticed. In terms of quantity, it is a bestseller in India, as per several news reports. But, its performance in the global market has yet to be discovered. An online report in *India Times* titled, “Amish Tripathi’s ‘Shiva Trilogy in U.K.’” talks about Jo Fletcher Books buying the English language rights of the *Shiva Trilogy*, but news regarding the global reception of his *Ramachandra Series* is unknown. This explains why the readership of retellings is limited to English-educated Indians and the Indian diaspora. Emma Dawson Varughese explains this –

... in their travel, these narratives will be received notably differently from the manner in which these narratives are received and consumed within India. Most likely, the narratives will be received outside of India and South Asia as fantastical, where ideas of shape-shifting, hybrid animal-humans, numerous deities and Vimana (a type of aircraft mentioned in the epics) are not part of the general socio-cultural fabric. Beneficially, fantasy fiction is able to transcend social and cultural barriers by nature of its ‘other-worldliness’. (360)

Another distinguishing feature of the readership is that they are tech-savvy and elite. Here, the market plays an important role. The market plays an essential role in the popularity of the retellings. Writers of the retellings create their texts for the market for several reasons. First, they need to sell their work of art for monetary benefits. Secondly, they need to propagate their ideals and political perspectives through their writings. This categorization is, however,

not mutually exclusive. Pierre Bourdieu's work *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* can theoretically explain this idea.

The text deals with the idea of symbolic goods, which connects the market and the social constraints of a particular society. He argues that a work of art cannot be purely subjective and objective, meaning that 'art for art's sake' and 'realism' cannot be achieved. A hierarchy of power structures determines every work of art. Social, political, and cultural aspects influence every work of art, and these aspects compete for legitimacy and recognition in the market of symbolic goods. Bourdieu introduces a concept called 'habitus', a system of ideas and perceptions that a person formulates through his/her education and exposure to his/her society and its power structure. Habitus aids a person in generating capital, not just money but also symbolic capital that helps him/her have a significant position in various fields, such as the literary market. In the field of cultural production, an artist's talent, along with the socio-political conditions of a particular society, determine his/her value in the market. It is a field of high competition for legitimacy. Writers, publishers, critics, and other agents like bookstore owners play a significant role in establishing their value or legitimacy in the market for monetary benefits and power.

Therefore, the field of cultural production is dynamic and highly competitive. The habitus and capital of writers like Amish Tripathi are Indian cultures, knowledge of the epics, influence of popular culture in the form of movies (the habitus), and employment of marketing strategies using financial capital. Book trailers and free distribution of a section of the novels before it is open for sale increase the demand for the product. This determined the popularity of Tripathi in the field of Indian literature. The habitus of writers like Kavita Kane and Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee is knowledge of the Indian epics, and the capital is political movements like feminism, subaltern movements, gender issues, and class conflicts. They lack the financial capital to market the symbolic goods a particular field demands. However, the

readership of the two types of products is mostly the same because of the common factor cutting across them – Indian myths. The difference is that one set of readers looks for entertainment and easy reads, and the other set of readers uphold the existing social, political, and cultural ideals and look forward to revisionist narrative's take on these aspects of society.

4.5. Conclusion

This chapter looks at why retellings are popular and why it is necessary. The first section has explained the concept of mythopoesis and its necessity. Myths are always relevant to society and should change with time to avoid unwanted rigidity. The second section mentions some theorists who have supported the relevance of myths and mythopoesis. The third section compares new myths with original myths by comparing characters from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* with those in the retellings to see contemporary mythopoesis. The last section analyses the nature of readership with market, social, political, and cultural factors determining it. The central argument in this chapter is that mythopoesis is an inevitable process in society. A confluence of artistic genius and creativity, along with the awareness of the power structure, social set-up, and market (field of cultural production), contribute to contemporary mythopoesis. The type of readers addressed is an English-educated, elite, tech-savvy, politically aware readership.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are inevitable texts in Indian society and culture. Myths and mythic characters from these texts are always influential. Writers in popular literature take stories and mythic characters and render them according to their creativity and needs. Myth is a favourite subject for them mainly because of two reasons – firstly, stories are already known, and only plotting is required according to their needs. Secondly, it will sell quickly because myths and stories have been popular for a long time. The post-liberalization and globalization periods and the neo-colonial popularity of the English language have contributed to the discourse of retellings. Since myths are part of Indian culture, literature based on myths sells fast in India. Emma Dawson Varughese exemplifies this with the ‘Bharati Fantasy’ concept in one of her essays. Myths’ unending social, cultural, political, and economic relevance makes retellers pursue them in their creative endeavours.

The question of originality is complicated in the case of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The debate over its authors and the time of its origin are still going on. The timelessness of stories and myths in these epics may be because of the lack of an authoritarian author and the non-availability of an original text in Sanskrit. One of the prominent critics in Malayalam literature, K C Narayanan, calls the *Mahabharata* free software. One of the peculiarities is that anybody can make any changes at any time. Retellers make use of this possibility in the epics. The redundancy of the epic mode and the Sanskrit language diminished the popularity of the written *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. There are multiple prose translations of these epics today. The first Indian English translation of the *Ramayana* is said to be done by Manmath Nath Dutt, according to

Bibek Debroy⁵⁴, and Kisari Mohan Ganguli does the first Indian English translation of the Mahabharata. These are the two primary references for the current study.

Even though prose translations of the ‘original’ texts are available, retellings are popular, and some of them occupy the best-sellers’ list. The reason is the redundancy of the unabridged prose translations and the relevance of the stories and myths. The discourse of retellings provides insight into the changing social, political, cultural, and economic aspects of myths and stories. The current research addresses three major questions about this discourse – what is happening in the discourse of retellings, how, and why? The three core chapters in this thesis address these three queries.

The first chapter is an introductory chapter introducing the discourse of retellings. The chapter gives an overview of the originality of the epics and their multiple versions. It has been found that different cultures use these epics according to their needs. For example, the Malayalam translation, also a spiritual rendering, of the *Ramayana* by Thunchath Ezhuthachan is popular in Kerala households during *Karkitakam*, supposedly an inauspicious month. It is a widespread belief in Kerala that reading the *Ramayana* this month will eliminate negativities. Also, another belief is that reading the *Mahabharata* is inauspicious because it is about treachery, rivalry, violence, and war. People personalize myths according to their necessities. For instance, Tara Kaushal documented interviews with some of the rapists in India, among whom some quoted from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to reinforce their patriarchal attitude towards women. In popular culture, movies are made from epics even today, like *Shaakuntalam*, directed by Gunasekhar, based on Kalidasa’s *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, and *Adipurush*, directed by Om Raut, based on Valmiki’s *Ramayana*. Apart from this, television series based on these epics are telecasted

⁵⁴ Manmath Nath Dutt: *Translator Extraordinaire* by Bibek Debroy (2021)

even today. During COVID, there was a popular demand for re-telecasting the Doordarshan series, the *Ramayan*, directed by Ramanand Sagar, and the *Mahabharat*, directed by B R Chopra. Thus, myths and mythic characters are significant and popular always. The discourse of retellings exists amidst these multiple versions of the ‘original’ stories. This is one of the reasons for their ‘saleability.’ Many factors contribute to the social, political, cultural, and economic significance of the discourse of retellings.

Primary texts taken for this study are evidence of the significance of this discourse. The first chapter lists fourteen Indian English novels and novels in English translation and their relevance in this study. The section ‘Literature Review’ has shown that the study of epics is always relevant and ongoing. The current research stands out mainly because the thesis prioritizes the narrative aspects, mythopoesis, and market factors related to the discourse of retellings. The politics of retelling addressed in the thesis is the deliberate removal of religious, supernatural, and superhuman factors concerning the characters. In the retellings, Rama, Sita, and Krishna are not incarnations of the god and the goddess but human beings. Narratives about these characters are stories about their liberation, recognition of their identity, agency, and inner strengths. Contemporary mythopoesis focuses on the human traits of mythic characters. This is a defining feature of the discourse of retellings.

The second chapter focuses on ‘emplotment’ or the conscious process of making plots by arranging events in a particular manner. Authors constructing plots in a specific manner occupy the author’s function in the discourse of retellings where their identity beyond ‘retellers’ is irrelevant. However, they are beneficiaries of the economic value of this discourse. In short, they do not have an authority over the discourse. This feature originates in the flexibility of the narrative of the epics, which anybody can use at any time for their purposes. The discourse of retellings continues this tradition of not-so-authoritative authors. The only important factor is the nature of the plot containing characters occupying a

particular position in the narrative and recurring themes and motifs relevant to the saleability of retellings.

The process of plot-making is crucial in the discourse of retelling. Plots of the retellings contain techniques like anagnorisis and peripeteia to increase their dramatic appeal. Also, some of the narrative functions identified by Vladimir Propp play a vital role in the plotting. For example, Rama and Raavan's hero/villain binary is one of the prominent features of Amish Tripathi's texts. Events revolve around this binary. Since the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are known as *itihasa* in the Indian context, they have historical significance. The concept of emplotment, developed by Hayden White, is applied to understand the nature of plots in retellings. The meaning of the plot in a retelling is a result of this emplotment process. For example, Kavita Kane and Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee emplot their narratives from a feminist perspective. Amish Tripathi emplots the narrative in the mode of fantasy.

Themes and motifs in the plot decide the relevance of the discourse of retellings. The necessity of binary, the fragile familial bonds, the significance of female agency, nature versus civilization, and the redemption of the self are the major themes in the retellings taken for this research. The binary of hero/villain is explicit in Amish Tripathi's *Ramchandra Series*. This motif ensures the movement of the plot along with the cliff-hanger technique. Fragile familial bonds convey ideas about marriage, chastity, and trust. Also, sibling relationships are fragile in the retellings. For example, Lakshmana suspects Bharata of plotting against Rama. In the *Battle Beyond Kurukshetra*, Arjuna attempts to behead Yudhishtira because of a hurt ego. A similar fragile relationship could be found between Raavan and Surpanakha, where the latter is marginalized as the weakest gender. These weak bonding among the characters ensure plot movement. One of the most exhaustively used themes is the significance of female agency. Characters like Sita, Ahalya, Urmila, Draupadi,

and Satyavati assert their identity and liberate themselves from internal and external oppressive forces. Forest life is a significant motif in retellings. Characters like Bhima, Ahalya, and Sita renounce cities and find solace in forest life. Narratives employing the forest life motif criticize the problems of civilization, like power struggles, class conflicts, and patriarchy. Redemption of the self is another favourite theme of retellers. Retaining the original incidents, authors weave characters into narratives, pointing at the relevance of introspection when intense and drastic changes happen around.

The narrative technique of focalization used in the narratives of retellings shows how mythopoesis happens. Narrators are more critical than authors in the discourse of retelling. This is a feature continued from the narrative style of the original epics. The act of narration is oral initially in both epics. In the *Ramayana*, Narada tells Valmiki the story of Rama, which the latter writes down later. In the *Mahabharata*, Veda Vyasa narrates the epic to Ganesa, who writes it down. Therefore, ‘Who tells?’ is more important than ‘Who writes?’. It points to the relevance of concepts like focalization, narrator, narratee, and narration developed by theorists like Gerard Genette and Mieke Bal. Focalization is a method of limiting the story. Characters occupy different focal positions in the narrative, limiting the view of the text. There are three types of focalization – zero, internal, and external. Textual examples of these focalizations show that the discourse of retellings requires limiting the narrative in a particular way to maintain its significance.

The fourth chapter examines the concepts of mythopoesis for and by the market. Market factors and the readership influence mythopoesis or myth-making. Mythopoesis is a necessary process mainly because old myths do not identify with changes in contemporary society. For example, Sita’s strength is preferred to the meek and obedient Sita. Urmila is almost silent in the epic *Ramayana*, but she is a learned individual in retellings questioning patriarchy and unnecessary adherence to obsolete rules. Surpanakha is not a demoness in

retellings but a woman who is explicit about her sexuality and personal freedom. Theorists like Harry Slochower and Joseph Campbell advocate for the necessity of mythopoesis according to the needs of time and society. New myths are created for the market and the new readership. Writers use their habitus and capital to create narratives in this discourse that earns them market benefits. Knowing the readership is crucial in achieving monetary benefits with this discourse.

After a comparative study of the translated version of original epics and retellings, it has been elucidated that many marginalized characters are brought to the forefront. For example, characters like Renuka Devi and Ahalya are victims of men's wrath. They became victims of extreme adherence to *dharma* and patriarchy that overlooked individual freedom and choice. Karna's class conflict is explained in a few retellings. His partnership with the Kauravas is connected to the discriminatory experiences he had in his life. Bhima's identity as the progeny of a hunter makes him realize the significance of the forest as an arena of possibilities than the restrictive civilizational life.

Features of the readership consuming these narratives are identified through this discourse. They are English-educated Indians or the Indian diaspora, elite, tech-savvied, literature enthusiasts, and politically alert. Retellings are written in English, a language that diminishes caste differences among humans. Also, the readership knows old myths and epics. One of the determining factors of this feature is the popular demand for a re-telecast of the Doordarshan TV series based on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Another factor is that a new version of the already popular characters is exciting because of which writers like Amish Tripathi top the best-sellers list. However, the market is limited to India and Indian readers abroad, exemplified through the study of Emma Dawson Varughese about 'Bharati Fantasy.' The readership is said to be tech-savvied and elite mainly because of their knowledge of technology. Amish Tripathi released book trailers for his texts *Scion of*

Ikshvaku and *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*. The readership's political alertness is deduced from how authors incorporate existing social and political issues in the narrative. For instance, Amish Tripathi has narrated two views on the Delhi gang rape case through Bharata and Rama. The former advocated for public punishment and instant justice for the victim. However, the latter believed in the legal system and the significance of fair trial for everyone.

In conclusion, the critical discourse analysis of the discourse of retellings has explained its significance and features. The discourse of retellings taken for the current research is a system of texts in the Indian English novel genre forming an epistemology of Indian thoughts, ideals, and values influenced by colonial modernity. It conflicts with the 'original' text, constantly deconstructing and reconstructing through retellings the belief, value, and knowledge systems. The inaccessibility of the Sanskrit language for a long time in history for the underprivileged sections of society adds to the conflict. With colonialism and technological advances, the popularity of the English language became evident. Novels became a popular and democratic genre, unlike the redundant and rigid epic genre, as Mikhail Bakhtin observes. Thus, the discourse of retellings exists as a resistance towards the unwanted rigidity attached to myths and religion that must change according to the needs of the time and society. This discourse aims at broadening thoughts about gender equality, the spiritual potential of individuals, and the redemption of the self from regressive ideas. This is why multiple interpretations of the common literary trope of *dharma* exist through multiple character focalizations. The genesis of Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, described within itself, points at the origin of retellings as such. The question is why retellings happen.

The discourse of retellings, like the original epics, is relevant in propagating new myths. Nobody can claim authority or ownership of this discourse. Authors occupying the

author function reap economic benefits, propagating ideals necessary for the time. Narratives are explicitly constructed, placing characters in vital positions limiting the narrative but broadening thoughts. Specific themes and motifs are used in plots to ensure engagement and saleability. In addition, the nature of the readership can be deduced from this discourse. However, the impact of the discourse of retelling is beyond the scope of this study. A sociological survey of the impact of the literary genre of retellings may be considered for future research.

The relationship between the author function and the readership is significant in understanding the possibilities of this discourse. Authors take up the role of retellers and occupy the author function in the discourse of retellings. This author function fulfills the need to make new myths concerning the existing social, political, and cultural scenario. The habitus and capital of authors determine the nature of the final product that goes into the discourse and, most importantly, the market. The author function in the discourse occupied by authors has two advantages - it is a platform for propagating the dominant (at times hegemonic) political ideals, and it fetches economic benefits to whoever occupies it mainly because of the popularity of the two Indian epics. The participants are not only authors but also readers. The author function is informed by the readership who has the following qualities - English-educated, elite, tech-savvy, politically aware, and those already possessing knowledge about Indian epics and myths in them. In general, this discourse informs about the Indian society that has drastically changed in terms of scientific and technological advancements, to an extent, leading to an age of instant gratification (emergence of Twitter fiction, for example) and political correctness.

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THE MARKET AND SOCIAL REQUIREMENTS OF THE RAM/RAAVAN BINARY

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Abstract

Literature representing the truths about society is a common notion. Writers in the past and even today have brought literature as if it is a mirror to people's lives. Currently, the literary trend of retellings and retellers take stories from the epics and show them in a particular way. They uphold the values in the epics and create a narrative in a different mode of narration, that is, through the novel. Writers not only create something new to instruct and delight but also strive to meet society's expectations. The social, cultural, and political aspects of society are always present in literary production or as a cultural product. However, the market is a crucial factor in creative endeavours nowadays. Writers like Amish Tripathi and Ashok K Banker have written novels based on myths befitting contemporary times. They have not only retold epic tales to revive cultural values but also created a fast-selling genre. Thus, the production of retellings is motivated from two sides - reviving cultural values and market benefits. The Ram/Raavan mytheme, also a binary, is the crux of the selected texts. Pierre Bourdieu, Frederic Jameson, and Hayden White's theories frame the study of these Indian English novels retelling myths.

Keywords: myths, retellings, cultural production, emplotment, binary

Introduction

The relationship between literature and society has been subjected to immense research since immemorial. Scholars and literature enthusiasts have widely explored literature as a mirror to society. Several movements have come up, like realism, in which a work of art is considered a representation of the truths about society. However, this trend has changed in the interdisciplinary realm of the sociology of literature. Writers not only look at society as their subject matter but also surrender to the needs of society and create art. Literature is a mirror to society and a medium of society in which people decide what has to be written. It is the latter sociological aspect that is dealt with in this paper.

Literature is a medium of entertainment. However, it is used for socio-political reasons as well. The social aspects in literature are not always informing society about what they are, but also society informs about their needs. Authors like Amish Tripathi and Ashok K Banker try to fix their literature in the moulds of expectations of a particular society, that is, the Indian elite readership. Tripathi's heroes are Ram and Raavan in the texts *Scion of Ikshvaku* and *Enemy of Aryavarta*, and Banker's hero is Ram in the text *Prince of Ayodhya*. Ram and Raavan used to belong to the traditional binary of hero/villain, clearly differentiated characteristically. However, today, Tripathi has seemingly blurred this binary in his novels. On the other hand, Banker has mobilized this binary by placing a flawless superhuman Ram against a diabolic monster Raavan. However, Tripathi's texts seem to be more popular than Banker's for a reason - the readers do not need a traditional hero with extremities, but one that exhibits the grey shades of his/her character.

The unwillingness to accept as well as accept certain desirable features of rendered mythical characters is also evident in some of the retellings of myths in different media. For example, Mani

Ratnam's movie *Raavan* alludes to the mythical Raavan through a different lens, making the audience identify with the "villain" rather than the excellent cop hero Ram. The cartoon series *Chota Bheem* has adapted the Bhima, one of the Pandavas, ripping off his myth traits except for his strength. Since cartoons have an immense effect on a child's growth, the adaptation of myth stories and mythical characters is demanded by society as it has a pedagogic function in this technological era. At the same time, parents of children do not approve of the adverse effects of such cartoons on children's behaviour and cognitive abilities¹. The primary concern of this paper is how society demands a particular way of writing/literature and how writers bear this aspect in mind and find methods to reach their work of art to a larger accepting audience and make a brand that sells quickly. Why is there a shift like this? It is the central question that underlines this research article. The paper elucidates the sociological aspects of literature concerning the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Frederic Jameson, and Hayden White. The primary texts taken for study are that of Amish Tripathi and Ashok K Banker.

Amish Tripathi and Ashok K Banker Dealing with Binary Systems

Ram and Raavan together form a binary system. *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a binary system as "one by which each group and sub-group is perpetually divided into two, the one with a positive and the other with a negative character, till individuals (or general) are reached." Regarding Saussurian structuralism, binary opposition is the "means by which the units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined against what it is not" (www.litencyc.com). The Saussurian binary system has also influenced the structuralist anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss's study of myths. Levi-Strauss, in his essay "The Structural Study of Myth" that appeared in *Structural Anthropology* (1963), says:

"Myth, like the rest of language, is made up of constituent units. These constituent units presuppose the constituent units present in language when analyzed on other levels— namely, phonemes, morphemes, and sememes— but they, nevertheless, differ from the latter in the same way as the latter differ among themselves; they belong to a higher and more complex order. For this reason, we shall call them *gross constituent units* [mythemes]...The true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but bundles of such relations, and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined to produce a meaning". (210-11)

In the two texts of Amish Tripathi, namely *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* and *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*, and in *Prince of Ayodhya* by Ashok K Banker, one could find the Ram-Raavan mytheme contributing to establishing the binary of good/evil through various literature tropes and sociological aspects. The titles of the texts prima facie establish the binary. When Ram is the "scion" and "prince," Raavan is identified as the "enemy." In the text *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*, there is a conversation between Vishwamitra and Arishtanemi as follows:

"[Vishwamitra asks] 'What does every hero need, Arishtanemi?'

...

Arishtanemi smiled as he finally understood. 'A villain.'

[Vishwamitra continues] 'Exactly. We need the right villain to act as the foil for our hero. Only then will people see the hero as their saviour, as the Vishnu.'" (94)

From a political perspective, apart from the textual scenario, it is clear that Raavan is a crucial tool to deify Ram.

1

Jansher Chakkittammal has explained these aspects in the paper "A Study on Impact of 'Chota Bheem' On Children's Social Behavior."

Sociological Factors Contributing to the Binary Ram/Raavan

This session explores the possibilities of some of the critical concepts of the sociology of literature, like cultural production by Pierre Bourdieu, emplotment by Hayden White, and collective unconscious by Frederic Jameson in interpreting the narratives of Amish Tripathi and Ashok K Banker.

In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Pierre Bourdieu argues that the social and cultural fields play a significant role in the production of the cultural product. Every cultural product involves both creativity and social factors. He also brings up the concept of "cultural capital," which denotes symbolic resources, such as knowledge, taste, and cultural background. Along with the literary works, the distribution of cultural capital and the power struggles in the cultural field shape their reception.

Emplotment is a concept developed by Hayden White in his 1973 book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth-Century Europe*. White discusses the selection and arrangement of historical events in a specific narrative form or plot in this text. It points to the idea that history is a construct. The idea of emplotting is significant in retellings as there is a change in the narrative mode and genre – from epic to novel.

Frederic Jameson mentions collective unconsciousness in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Jameson draws ideas from the works of Carl Jung and other psychoanalytic theorists to explore the effect of cultural narratives in shaping social and political ideologies. The collective unconsciousness of a society is expressed through its cultural production. He also says that the study of literature and other forms of cultural expression point to the underlying structures of society.

The research article emphasises the point that writers of myth retellings emplot the narrative as a cultural capital, catering to the collective unconscious. Writers like Amish Tripathi and Ashok K Banker narrate the stories from the epic in a particular manner aiming to fulfil the aesthetic and social needs of the society. Both their works are best sellers because of marketing. Amish Tripathi presents book trailers before the audience. In addition, the cover pages have occluded images of the mythical figures he has used as significant protagonists. Also, famous publishers publish both writers' works (Westland Press, HarperCollins, Penguin Books). All these factors aim at the readership; interestingly, the readership influences the author and their emplotment. The question is whether these works hint at the collective unconsciousness of a new reading class wanting to go back to the past literature for values and aesthetic pleasure or deriving pleasure in fulfilling their basic instincts and needs by reading about a hero with all desirable qualities within a limited time frame of the novel compared to the vastness of the epic mode of narration. The authors attempt to strike a balance between the two. The aspiration to develop the hero/villain binary is a part of this act. However, the binary of good/evil is different in these two authors, who seem to explain the difference in their popularity. Sociological factors like power, politics, patriarchy, and the literary trope of love work in this equation of establishing the binary. The proceeding section will elucidate how this binary is established in the selected texts. Also, the larger question of the author-reader relationship in the context of market and cultural production will be mentioned.

The Ram/Raavan Binary

In the epic *Ramayana*, Raavan is the king of Lanka. He was a mighty ruler who established the prosperity of Lanka. He was a devotee of Shiva and had some traits of the angry god. He was aggressive and a lover of the arts. He has written several scriptures himself. In his translation of the *Ramayana*, Manmath Nath Dutt describes Raavan as "The sovereign of Lanka, the terror of the

world and the foe of gods" (Book 3, Chapter 13). He also calls Raavan "That strong and mighty Rakshasa" (Book 3, Chapter 16). Raavan was a villain with character and not a mere grotesque literary figure used to highlight the hero's goodness. He was a virtuous king with immense knowledge about reigning and kingship. Therefore, Ram asks Lakshman to meet a dying Raavan to learn the ideals of ruling as he was a learned king.

"Sri Ram said to Lakshmana, 'Go now, dear brother, and seek out Raavana. Learn from him what he knows, for he was a wise and learned king. He must have acquired much knowledge and experience during his long and eventful life. Approach him with reverence and humility, and ask him for his advice. Perhaps he will be willing to share his wisdom with you in these last moments of his life.'" (Book 7, Chapter 68)

In his works, Amish Tripathi explored these characteristic traits of Raavan in detail in the text *Enemy of Aryavarta*. The motivating factor is not only the characteristic features as explained in the original epic but also the understanding that readers have evolved to such an extent that they do not wish to have a grotesque villain anymore to highlight the hero's qualities. Hence, Amish Tripathi became the writer of the most popular fiction based on myths compared to Ashok K Banker.

The writings of Ashok K Banker are the fantastical rendering of the stories from the original epic leaving the readers perplexed and more or less puzzled by the extravagance of creativity. He has lifted the characters away from their grounds. He has given them a new attire to live in a different literary fantasy realm, completely departing from the mythic realm. The works of Ashok K Banker cater to the basic instincts of a person. It has characters succumbing to their basic instincts and grotesque scenes. For instance, Banker has diminished Shurpanakha into a slave of Raavan. In an episode in the novel *Prince of Ayodhya*, Shurpanakha urinates at the sight of Raavan's demonic figure. Also, Manthara is portrayed as a witch, sacrificing infants to offer blood to Raavan, expecting his appeasement and a subsequent boon.

The notable difference between these two writers is that Amish Tripathi's characters are grounded in the original stories, and Ashok K Banker has unleashed his fantasy in an uncontrolled manner. However, both achieve the good/evil binary in different ways. The situations and events are arranged in such a format/emplotted to achieve specific goals like literary appeal, saleability, and social, political, and cultural agendas which can be looked at in the upcoming sections.

Factors Establishing the Binary

Ram is the epitome of *dharma*; he endeavours to establish peace and harmony in his kingdom Ayodhya. In due course, he goes to the extent of abandoning Sita to establish *dharma*. Thus, the love for one's kingdom and the feeling of responsibility and duty outweigh his desires toward Sita. On the other hand, Raavan's love for Sita is motivated by intense passion towards her and also inspired by an immense sense of pride in possessing a beautiful being. The never intersecting parallel love for Sita, the differences in their love towards other family members, and the varying notions of *dharma* they possess make them an irresolvable binary, as exemplified through Tripathi's retellings. The texts address the necessity of such a binary in the larger contexts of politics and the market.

The narrative situations and character portrayals are different in Ashok K Banker. Ram is portrayed as noble, just, and virtuous, but with a superhero colouring his character. For example, Ram is seen to be possessed by the Bala and Atibala hymns and becomes a war machine.

Vishwamitra tells Lakshman:

"He is caught in the battle fever of Bala and Atibala... The maha mantras take you over at the moment of crisis and turn you into a perfectly efficient fighting engine. That is what Ram is now, a perfect weapon. Fixed in a state of stasis that will pass

once the crisis is truly past. The only reason he does not shoot at you is because he senses your own brahman flow and essential goodness". (445-6)

It exemplifies the extent to which he has rendered the myth stories and characters. Ashok K Banker wrote a spin-off when Amish Tripathi retold the myth and epic stories. However, both these writers are famous on different scales. Nevertheless, the readership created by Amish Tripathi looks forward to a more grounded myth retelling than the fantastical spin-offs by Ashok K Banker.

The chronology of the publication of the two retellings *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* and *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta* is worth noting because there is a deliberate market-driven interest at play (The former was published in 2015 and the latter in 2019). Amish Tripathi follows the hyperlink narrative style, which is a form of narrative in which:

"There are many characters, and a connection brings them all together. The three main characters in the Ram Chandra series are Ram, Sita, and Raavan. Each character has life experiences that mould who they are, and each has their adventure and riveting backstory. Finally, their stories converge with the kidnapping of Sita." (*Raavan*, 17)

Tripathi began the series with the story of Ram, then Sita, and finally Raavan. Abiding by the story time, the story of Raavan should have come first. However, if such a placement had happened, Amish Tripathi would have encountered a market risk because Raavan, the villain, would have been justified first than Ram, the hero. If *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta* had been released before, the character of Raavan would have been recognized more as a "Byronic² hero" than a villain. Since *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* was released first, Tripathi has contributed to establishing the hero/villain binary following market requirements. The titles themselves prove this fact, as mentioned before. When Ram is the scion, Raavan is the enemy. When Ram is considered the heir of a prestigious clan, Raavan is an outcast.

The attitude toward female characters by the authors might have been a determining factor in their popularity. In Tripathi's works, the female characters (Sita and Sunaina) are strong and rational and capable enough to reign a kingdom. However, the female characters in Banker, especially Kaikeyi, are portrayed as gluttonous and lascivious women. For instance, the description of Kaikeyi goes like this – "Her lips were bright from the tobacco juice, a gory contrast to her pale northern complexion" (193). Lakshman and Shatrughan hated her, unlike the usual stories that they had respect for the three mothers equally.

Conclusion

Ram and Raavan are heroes in their own stories in Amish Tripathi. Compared to each other, they always form a binary with a clear-cut hierarchy. One is always a hero, and the other a perpetual villain – a formula required for political and market interests. In conclusion, the Ram/Raavan binary is established through emplotment using literary tropes like love and heroism. The differing patriarchal portrayal of women also matters in determining the acceptability of retellings. Considering market requirements, this binary helps an author ensure his/her success. Also, the nature of readership influences the author and his writings, and vice versa. Power dynamics are at play in determining the success and failure of a retelling. In a larger political context, the Ram/Raavan binary paved the way for the deification of Ram and the diminishing of Raavan's character.

² A Byronic hero can be conceptualized as an extreme variation of the **Romantic hero** archetype. Traditional Romantic heroes tend to be defined by their rejection or questioning of standard social conventions and norms of behaviour, their alienation from the larger society, their focus on the self as the centre of existence, and their ability to inspire others to commit acts of good and kindness. Romantic heroes are not idealized but imperfect and often flawed individuals who, despite their sometimes less than savoury personalities, often behave heroically. (study.com)

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