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Literary Theories

Myth and Modernity: Contemporary Retellings of the Ramayana

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Abstract: Indian epics, such as the Ramayana, play an important role in India's cultural, ethical, and literary imagination. The Ramayana, which was traditionally transmitted through oral narration and classical poetic forms, has evolved through reinterpretation in contemporary writing. Modern novelistic retellings of epics represent a substantial change away from idealized and divinely sanctioned narratives and toward human-centered explorations of emotion, identity, and moral conflict. This paper investigates how contemporary writers adapt the epic Ramayana into modern novels, bridging the gap between myth and modernity. This paper focuses on modern retellings, such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*, Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, and Amish Tripathi's *Ram Chandra Series*. These works reimagine the epic by emphasizing disadvantaged views, particularly Sita, who is traditionally shown as a symbol of obedience and sacrifice. In contrast, modern myths depict Sita as a contemplative, resilient, and self-aware individual who challenges patriarchal standards and redefines dharma. Similarly, Amish Tripathi's retelling humanizes legendary figures by depicting Rama as an ethical leader dealing with complicated political and moral issues rather than a totally heavenly hero. Using intertextuality theory, this paper investigates how these contemporary writings interact with the classical epic. Instead of denying the Ramayana, modern writers adapt its themes to highlight contemporary challenges like gender equality, agency, power, and justice. The transition from epic to novel permits the ancient story to stay culturally relevant while adjusting to changing social conditions. This paper concludes that modern retellings of the Ramayana reaffirm the epic's status as a living text. By blending mythic tradition with modern sensibilities, contemporary novels ensure the continued relevance and reinterpretation of the Ramayana in present-day Indian literature.

Keywords: Ramayana, Modern Retellings, Myth and Modernity, Intertextuality, Contemporary Indian Literature, Feminist Rewriting.

Indian society's moral principles, gender roles, and societal ideals have all been influenced by the Ramayana, which is more than just a religious or literary work. The epic, which is traditionally credited to Valmiki, depicts Sita as the perfect woman who embodies chastity, obedience, and sacrifice, and Rama as the personification of dharma. Through oral storytelling, performance traditions, and classical poetry, this story was passed down through the ages, perpetuating romanticized notions of virtue and courage.

However, Indian regional literature and English-language fiction have returned to the epic in the twentieth and twenty-first century with new insights. Modern writers paraphrase the Ramayana to address issues like justice, political ethics, individual agency, and gender equality. Psychological realism and ethical uncertainty replace mythic absolutism in these retellings. This paper looks at how contemporary novelistic retellings of the classical epic reimagine events, themes, and characters that are either absent or subdued.

Theoretical Framework: Intertextuality and Myth Rewriting

Intertextuality is the process by which a text's meaning is shaped by its connections to other texts. Contemporary versions of the Ramayana are not only recitations of Valmiki's epic; rather, they are intertextual narratives that engage with it. "A tissue of quotations" from literary and cultural traditions constitutes a text, according to Roland Barthes. By analyzing, rewriting, and reinterpreting the epic, modern writers challenge its ideological presuppositions. Writers can question the epic's silences while maintaining its cultural authority through myth rewriting, especially when it comes to women's voices, political power, and moral complexity. This approach makes the Ramayana a living text that can be modified to fit new social and historical contexts.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

This book gives narration to a character that is typically characterized by her relationship with Rama by retelling the Ramayana from Sita's first-person point of view. Rather of depicting Sita as a passive victim, this book shows her to be thoughtful, self-assured, and emotionally mixed. Divakaruni's Sita challenges patriarchal conventions ingrained in the epic tradition by raising issues of exile, battle, and abandonment. The novel opens with a direct assertion of authorship—"This is my story, told in my own words" (Divakaruni 1) which immediately signals a shift from epic objectification to self-representation.

An important note from the conventional epic is the focus on Sita's inner life, including her uncertainties, rage, and fortitude. Reflecting on this, Sita asks, "Why must a woman's worth be proved only through suffering?" (Divakaruni 230). This question, absent from Valmiki's epic, directly interrogates the patriarchal ethics underlying the myth. According to Sita, reclaiming her story is an act of self-definition because it has been repeated by others for a long time. Scenes like Agni Pariksha, where Sita reacts to the trial by fire, are recast as instances of personal suffering and moral injustice rather than as evidence of purity. Characters that are insignificant in Valmiki's story, such as Urmila, Mandavi, and Surpanakha, are used by Divakaruni to emphasize women's solidarity. The forest, which has historically been a place of exile, turns into a place where Sita can learn and grow.

Volga's Sita's Liberation

Because Volga's work depicts Sita's path toward self-liberation rather than marital reunion, it presents a radical feminist reinterpretation. Sita's enlightenment is positioned in the book through her interactions with women who stand in for opposition against patriarchal oppression, including Ahalya, Surpanakha, Renuka, and Urmila. In contrast to the epic, where Sita's value is determined by her suffering, Volga's Sita denies that sorrow is a virtue. It is presented as emancipation rather than failure when she ultimately decides to leave Rama.

Volga redefines dharma as self-respect and ethical selfhood rather than obedience. This is explicitly stated when Sita reflects, "Dharma that destroys the self cannot be sacred" (Volga 92). The novel concludes with Sita's autonomous decision to separate from Rama, summarized in the declaration, "I chose myself" (Volga 128), a resolution entirely absent from the classical epic.

A critique of moral absolutism, the female yearning for autonomy, and the rejection of societal validation through sacrifice are elements that are not present in the classical epic but are introduced in this reworking. By redefining dharma as ethical selfhood and self-respect rather than obedience, Volga makes a significant transition from legendary idealism to feminist ethics.

Humanizing the Divine: Amish Tripathi's Ram Chandra Series

With contrast to devotional depictions, Amish Tripathi's version presents Rama as a human leader molded by duty, law, and political responsibility. Rama is not born divine but rises to greatness via moral decision-making and self-discipline in Scion of Ikshvaku and later books. In contrast to the myth, Rama is shown as a strategist who navigates ethical quandaries, social inequity, and administrative blunders.

Her identity is emphasized when the narrative notes that “Sita was not just Ram’s wife; she was a warrior in her own right” (Tripathi 173). In this series, Sita is a competent warrior and administrator who has received training in both warfare and governance, traits that are mostly lacking in the classical epic. By emphasizing social rules, economic systems, and institutional structures, Tripathi reinterprets the Ramayana as a political story rather than a merely spiritual one. Additionally, Ravana is humanized, shown as an ambitious monarch who is influenced by his circumstances rather than being completely wicked.

Contemporary Relevance of Ramayana Retellings

The Ramayana is kept relevant in today's world by contemporary authors who reimagine it. Readers today are particularly interested in topics like gender justice, personal agency, and moral leadership. These books challenge readers to think critically about inherited narratives instead than blindly accepting them. Through the coexistence of various voices and viewpoints, these reinterpretations enhance the epic's cultural significance rather than lessen it.

A notable change from heavenly absolutism to human-centered storytelling can be seen in contemporary novelistic retellings of the Ramayana. Writers like as Divakaruni, Volga, and Tripathi humanize mythical characters, reclaim underrepresented voices, and redefine dharma for the modern era through intertextual engagement. These pieces demonstrate how epics may still be dynamic narratives that reflect changing social ideals by bridging the gap between myth and modernity.

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