Retellings of Hindu Mythological Stories through 21st Century Hindi Cinema and Literature

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Abstract: The study has been undertaken to analyze the retellings of ancient Hindu mythological stories through 21st century Hindi cinema & literature. It is because of this mutual influence that we observe the introduction of progressive topics, modern representation of Hindu mythological characters and revisits to these stories with a feminist lens. The research paper analyzes the correlation between ancient Hindu mythology, modern Indian literature and 21st century Hindi cinema.

Introduction: India is deeply connected with all its religions and mythology has a huge influence here. Though there are many religions and mythologies in India, this research paper only focuses on Hindu mythological stories and its retellings through modern Hindi cinema and literature. With changing times, the way centuries-old mythology is being retold has also changed. New age retellings of Hindu mythologies (movies, shows, books) show a huge influence of Hindi cinema. This brings with itself a long list of pros and cons.

Objectives: Using content analysis, survey, and secondary research on the internet, this paper determines to study the following objectives:

1. To understand the influence of Hindi cinema in new age mythological broadcast content.
2. To study the inclusion of progressive topics in the 21st-century mythological literature.
3. To study the influence of Hindu mythological stories on Hindi cinema and Literature.
4. To understand the western influence in the modern representations and portrayal of Hindu mythological characters.
5. To study the influence of feminism in voicing various female and underrated characters in new age Hindu mythological literature.

Research Methodology: To prove our prime objectives, we have used two different research methods.

Survey: Using Google Form as our tool for a virtual survey, we sent out forms to around 100 people out of which we received 80 responses. The survey followed simple Yes/No/Maybe and Strongly Agree/Agree/Neutral/Disagree/Strongly Disagree scale.

Content Analysis: We studied different documents and communication artefacts; watched, read, and analysed all the mentioned movies, shows, and books. Based on our understanding and analysis, we have used multiple parameters to critically assess the subject and content.
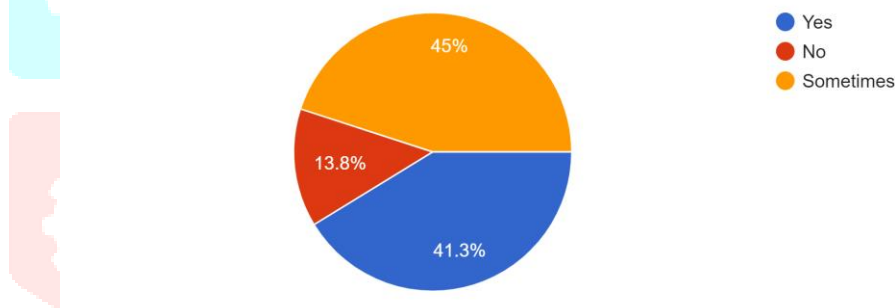
Population and Sample:

The survey was sent out uniformly to different age groups: however, most of the responses came from the age bracket of 15-30.
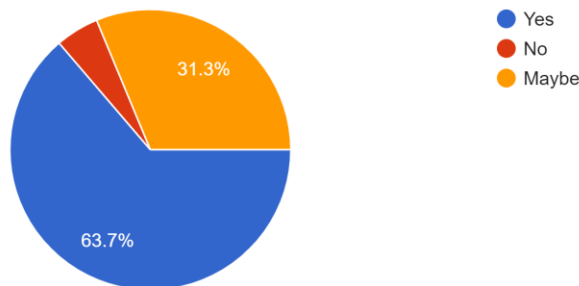
Age group
80 responses
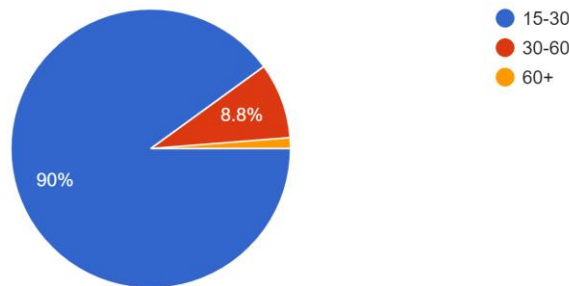
Survey Analysis: Pictorial representation of survey responses using pie chart.

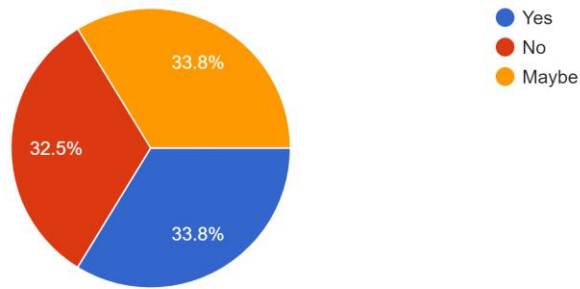Do you like watching mythological shows/movies?
80 responses

Has the retelling of ancient Hindu stories changed with modern times?
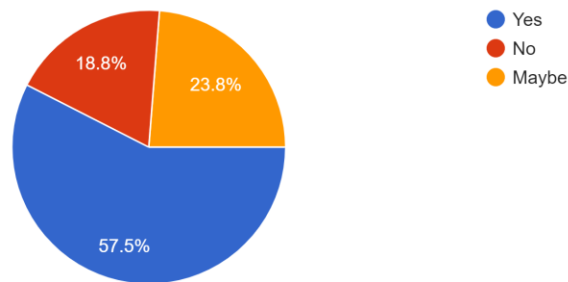80 responses

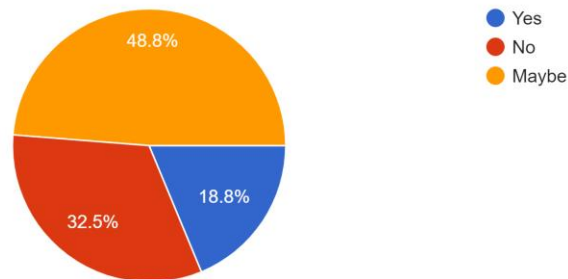Are Modern retellings of ancient stories more believable?
80 responses

Do you think the representation of folklores and legends drastically changed over time?
80 responses

Do new age mythological movies and literature justify sacred religious stories?
80 responses

On a scale of 1-5; Strongly Disagree (1) - Agree (2) - Neutral (3) - Disagree (4) - Strongly Agree (5)
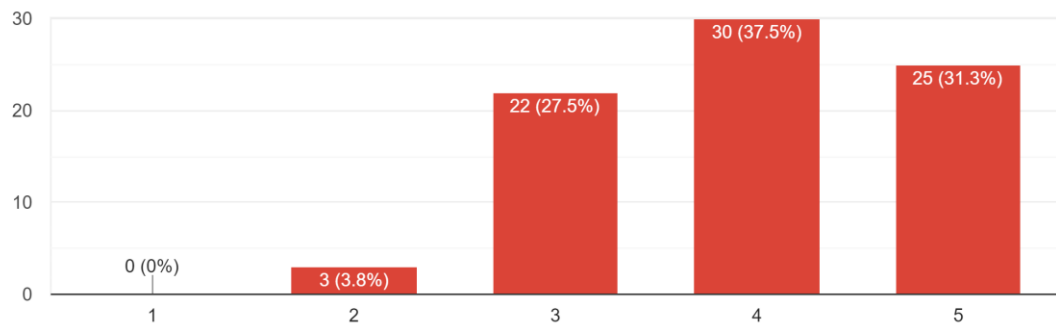
Hindi Cinema has influenced new age Hindu mythological broadcast content
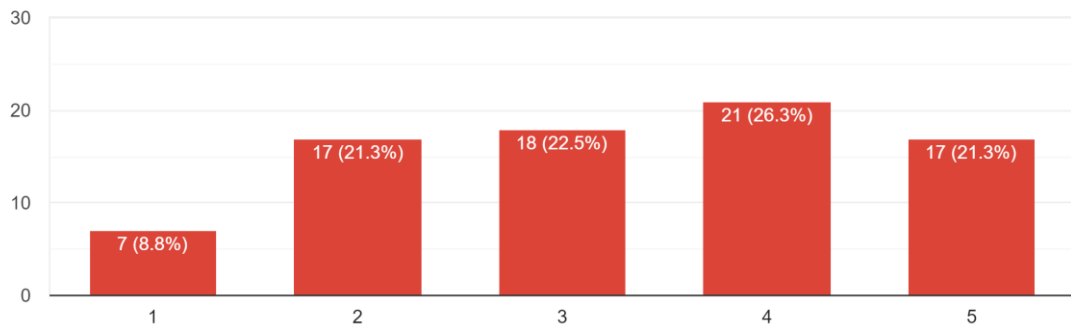
80 responses
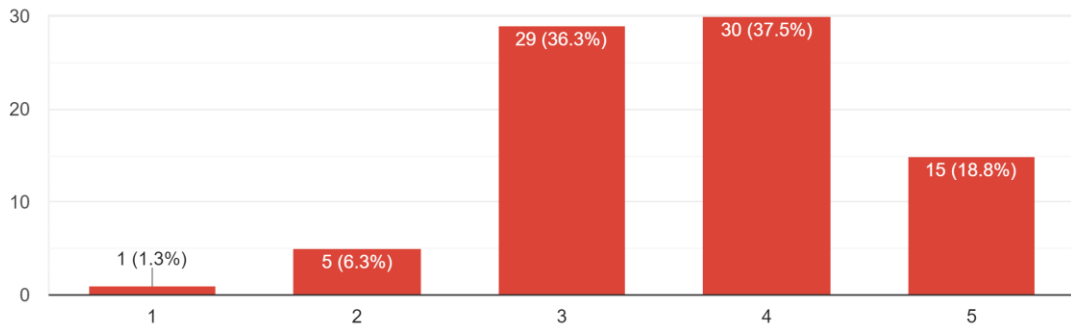
Modern mythological content is a blend of; the time they are set in and the contemporary world.
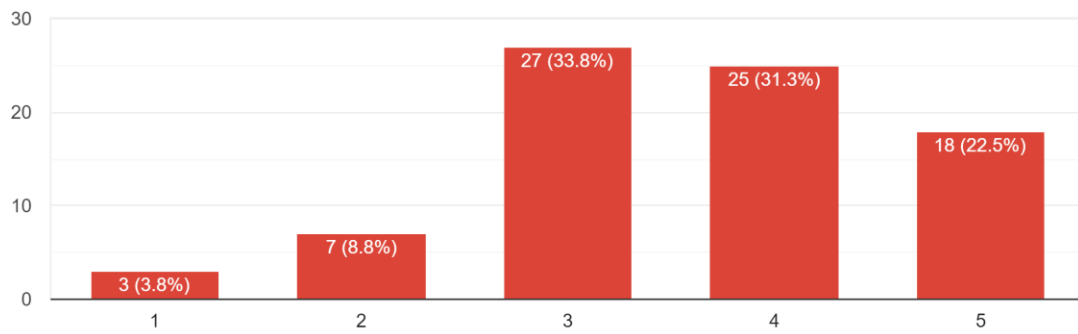
80 responses

Modern representation of Hindu mythological characters are portrayed with western heroic structures.

80 responses

Hindu Mythological stories experienced major revisits with a feminist lens while voicing various female and underrated characters.

80 responses

Content analysis: We analysed movies, shows, and books related to our research topic; based on our analysis, we have used four parameters to critically assess the subject and content.

Plot**:** The synopsis of the sequence of events/ actions that affects the character and thus the story as a whole.

Relevance: The nature of close connectivity of a story represented in the contemporary mediums of art of movies, shows and literary work.

Representation: The depiction of the characters and the essence of the stories in the contemporary mediums of art of movies, shows and literary work.

Western influence: The degree of influence of the western culture, belief, style and trends in the representation of ancient Indian stories through contemporary mediums of art.

Feminist perspective: The extent of progressive representation in the recreation of ancient Indian works, especially through a feminist lens in the contemporary mediums of art.

Movies and shows

1. Rajneeti (2010)

Raajneeti is a tale of a man's struggle to keep away from his family's political business, but even after his conspicuous avoidance, he ends up being sucked into it and now he has to understand and eventually fight the unsolved labyrinth of Indian politics. The movie draws parallels with the popular Indian epic – The Mahabharata, as the rivalry of two cousins escalates into a war and draws the protagonist to the dark side of family relations and politics. The heart of both the stories is political rivalry, indomitable ambition and blind lust for power and recognition.

- Relevance – 7.5/10

- Representation – 6/10

- Western influence – 4.5/10

- Feminist perspective – 8.5/10

2. <u>Raavan (2010)</u>

The film draws several parallels with the oldest Indian epic of Ramayana. Here, a ruthless police officer is on the chase to find a tribal leader, a bandit who has kidnapped his wife. Beera Munda, the tribal leader, kidnaps the officer's wife due to his motive to avenge his sister's death, committed through the hands of the local police as a result of police custodial torture and brutal rape.

- Relevance – 6.5/10

- Representation – 8/10

- Western influence – 4.5/10

- Feminist perspective - 7.5/10

3. <u>Sacred Games (2018)</u>

Sacred Games is a crime-thriller series where a long reigned gang leader is on the loose who tips a policeman that the city is going to be destroyed in the next 25 days. The series quickly follows a wild goose chase and every episode is accentuated with intertwined plots of mythological stories and characters to symbolise the events and the characteristics of the characters in the series.

- Relevance – 7.5/10

- Representation – 4.5/10

- Western influence – 6.5/10

- Feminist perspective – 7/10

4. <u>Afsos (2020)</u>

Nakul is a low esteemed fellow whose only intention is to end his invaluable life. After several failed suicide attempts, he pays to lay a trap for his own death. Upadhyay, a deadly assassin is assigned to kill him and she never leaves the job undone. But Nakul has a change of heart and chooses to live. Soon what entails is a cat and mouse chase, while a hermit from a faraway land turns up and causes an unexpected intervention, based on a mythological story that puts everything out of its place.

- Relevance – 8.5/10

- Representation – 7/10

- Western influence – 5.5/10

- Feminist perspective – 5/10

5. <u>Asur (2020)</u>

A mythological thriller series, set in the mystical city of Varanasi and high end CBI headquarters, follows an ex-CBI forensics expert's efforts, along with his senior officer, to find a brutal serial killer on the loose who leaves behind a mythological symbol after every victim he kills.

- Relevance – 6/10

- Representation – 7.5/10

- Western influence – 7.5/10

- Feminist perspective – 6.5/10

Books & Novels

1.   <u>The palace of illusions</u>

A reimagining of the world-famous Indian epic, the Mahabharata — told from the point of view of Panchali/ Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandavas. The novel traces the princess's life from a clueless and scared child to a strong spirited woman, with her five husbands who are cheated out of their kingdom. The book reimagines the personal and the political role of an unusual queen with the book ending in a terrible war that changes the fate of the country forever.

- Relevance – 9/10

- Representation – 8.5/10

- Western influence – 6.5/10

- Feminist perspective – 9.5/10

2.   <u>Asura: Tale of the vanquished</u>

This mythological fiction depicts the tale of Ramayana from the view point of Ravana, the infamous antagonist of the oldest Indian epic. The book explores the struggles of Ravana and his conflicted life that shaped him the way he was and attempts to create a link between the social strata as it may have existed at the time and as it is known today.

- Relevance – 8/10

- Representation – 8/10

- Western influence – 7.5/10

- Feminist perspective – 6/10

3.   <u>Ajaya Book 1- Roll of the dice</u>

A mythological fiction where the first part of the Ajaya series starts with describing the entire story from Duryodhana's point of view and traces the unheard voice of the most loathed antagonist of ancient Indian literature.

- Relevance – 7/10

- Representation – 6.5/10

- Western influence – 6/10

- Feminist perspective – 6.5/10

4.   <u>Shikhandi</u>

Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You is a collection of 30 short stories that reflects on gender and sexual identity. Here, the author revisits ancient mythological stories with a queer eye.

- Relevance – 8.5/10

- Representation – 8.5/10

- Western influence – 8/10

- Feminist perspective – 8/10

5.   <u>The Meluha Book series</u>

The Shiva Trilogy is the tale of an ordinary man who achieves extraordinary feats, 4000 years ago and those adventures endured, are remembered today as the myths of the Mahadev/ Shiva. The Immortals of Meluha, The Secret of the Nagas & The Oath of the Vayuputras are the three instalments of the Shiva trilogy.

- Relevance – 8/10

- Representation – 8/10

- Western influence – 7/10

- Feminist perspective – 6.5/10

Conclusion:

All the new age mythological shows and movies have influence of Hindi cinema and vice versa. We have also observed the introduction of many progressive topics in shows and especially new age literature. The modern mindset and thinking affect all mediums of storytelling. Mythological stories are experiencing major revisits with a feminist lens while voicing various female and underrated characters in new age literature.

As more and more content is being produced around Hindu mythology, it can be observed that it's a blend of both the worlds, the time they are set in and the present age. When it comes to animated films and even some shows, there's a heavy influence of western heroic structures in the portrayal of Gods and other characters.

Here are two graphs that compare previously mentioned films, shows, and books on the basis on relevance, representation, western influence, and feminist perspective.

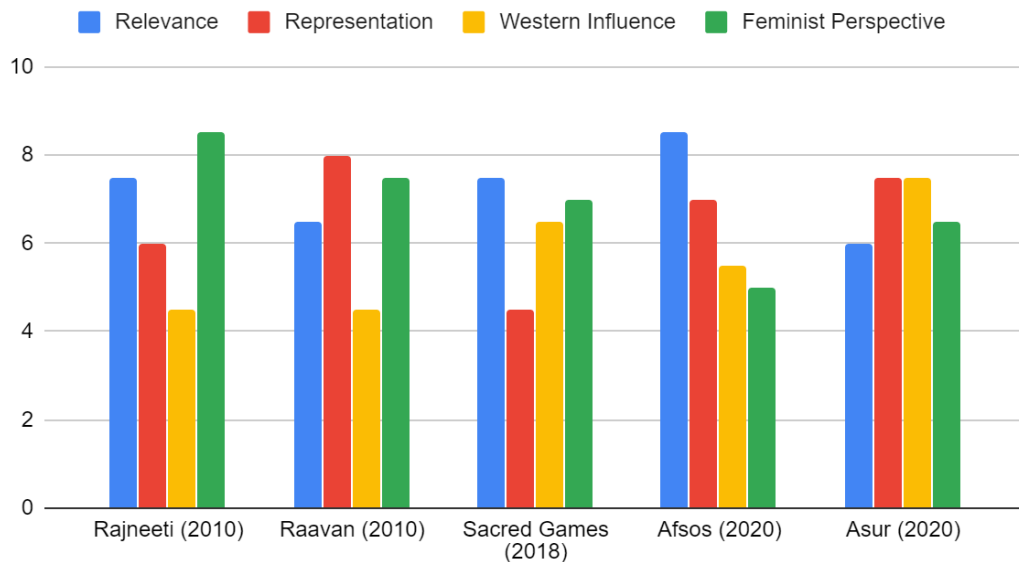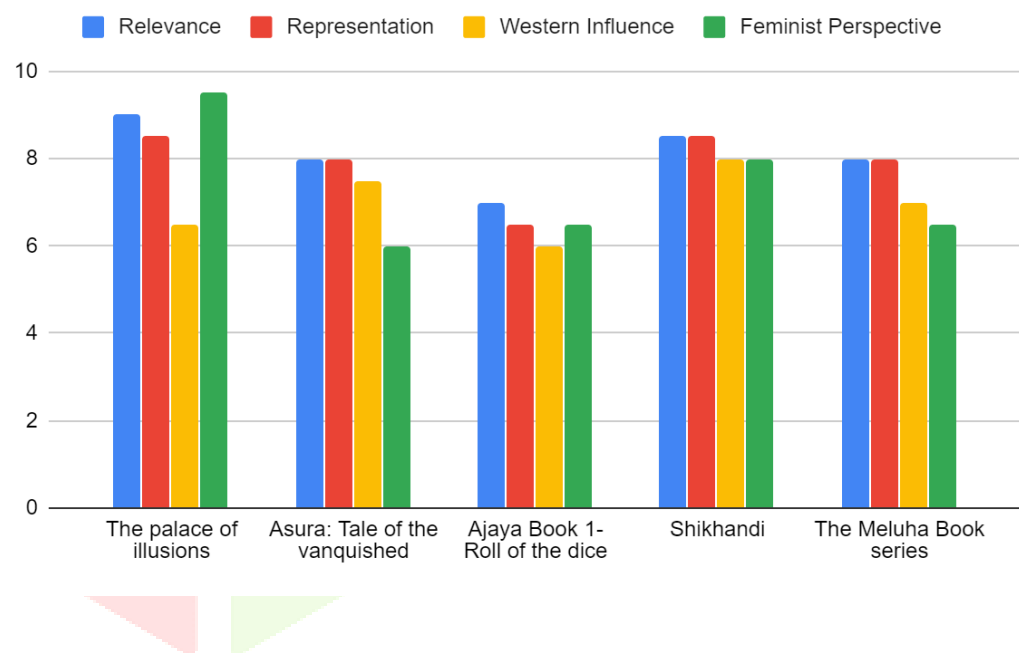Figure 1: Overview of Content Analysis (Movies & Shows)

Figure 2: Overview of Content Analysis (Books)

References:

Books:

1. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni – 'The palace of illusions' – Published by The Doubleday Broadway Publishing Group, New York, Picador India (2008)

2. Amish Tripathi - Meluha Book series – Westland Publishing Ltd (2010)

3. Devdutt Pattanaik – 'Shikhandi and other queer tales they don't tell you' – Zubaan and Penguin Books India (2014)

4. Anand Neelakantan – 'Roll of the Dice – Ajaya book series' – Leadstart Publishing Pvt Ltd (2015), distributed by Times group books

5. Anand Neelakantan – 'Asura: Tale of the Vanquished' - Leadstart Publishing Pvt Ltd (2012)

6. Vikram Chandra – 'Sacred Games' – HarperCollins (2006)

7. Rachel   Dwyer   –   'Filming   the   Gods: Religion   and   Indian   Cinema'   –   Routledge,   (2006)

Articles:

8. Swati Daftuar – 'Ancient mythology in modern avatars' – The Hindu Magazine (2016)

9. Akanksha Singh – 'How India's ancient myths are being rewritten' – BBC Culture (2019)