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The Persisting Influence Of Mythical Retellings In India

Aditi Balakrishnan Nair

Student

Christ (Deemed to be University), Bangalore, India

Abstract: Indian mythology is a vast tapestry woven from millennia of ancient epics, fables and regional lore, shaping the cultural landscape of the subcontinent. This paper explores the enduring influence of mythical retellings in contemporary India, examining its influence on India's history, its evolution and the contemporary trends present in mythical retellings. It also discusses the role of mythical retellings in reflecting the evolving social and cultural contexts through continuous reinterpretation and the warping and changing of narratives over time due to the natural inclination of the ancient art of oral storytelling. These retold narratives—passed down the generations through the ancient art of oral storytelling—serve not only as entertainment but also as moral compasses, philosophical treatises and expressions of societal values.

Index Terms - Mythical retellings, perspective, contemporary, narrative, restructuring, reflection, influence

INTRODUCTION

Mythical retellings in the modern sense are a relatively younger subcategory of diction where preexisting myths and fables traditionally passed down orally are penned, examined and dissected to create and explore unfamiliar possibilities while preserving the innate essence of the same story. However, it can be argued that mythical retellings are—to their truest essence—one of the oldest forms of stories in existence, with examples ranging from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana to The Palace of Illusions and Kaikeyi. The usage of oral storytelling ensures that there will always be details that are ignored or skipped over due to the limits of human memory. As a result, these narratives change with each retelling and thus become a patchwork retaining the touch of every storyteller across space and time simultaneously. Arguably the largest collaborative field of literature that continues without end, mythical retellings re-imagine the potential possibilities and revive the lost stories of lives that may have once walked across the Earth.

Through the continuous restructuring of narratives, the limits of human imagination and prediction are tested. Events and characters originally ignored are given new voices and perspectives, providing a sense of universality that makes it timeless and appealing across the annals of time.

RETELLINGS AS A TOOL IN THE TRANSMISSION OF CULTURE AND VALUES

The narratives formed through mythologies, at their origin, have always been heavily influenced by the human need to explain the unknown. Initially created to explain phenomena like rain, earthquakes and the creation of the universe, the retellings of these narratives provided structure to explain and transmit cultural knowledge, beliefs, traditions and values across centuries. Fables, epics, ballads, folktales and others of their kind share one common feature: they are all products of social values and contexts of the times.

All forms of stories in India, ranging from the *Ramayana* and *Sitayana* to the modern-day *Forest of Enchantments* and *Warrior of Mithila* all have cultural significance within it. It is also important to be wary of the role of translation and choice of vocabulary in the structuring of such narratives. In many circumstances, the decision behind the word chosen for a certain term reveals whether it's a male conservative or feminist perspective used by the translator, disregarding the intentions of the original material.

Mythical retellings highlight how these stories embed moral lessons and social codes, shaping ethical behaviour and societal norms. In VedaVysasa's *Mahabharata*, Kunti tells her son Arjuna to share his newly won wife Draupadi with his brothers, forcing the innocent young princess to serve five husbands in a society where it was against the norm for a woman to serve more than one husband. Forced into a taboo of the time with no ability to fight back due to the social values and beliefs of the time, *The Disrobing of Draupadi* was an infamous scene where Draupadi was shamed in public and called a 'slut' for serving five husbands as her husbands did nothing to preserve her dignity but remain silent spectators.

However, in *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kunti and Draupadi are depicted through a softer and kinder lens that restructures the known narrative such that Kunti had not realized that Arjuna's wins of the day had been a wife and had thus accidentally pushed her into the unforeseen duty of serving five men. This is a result of the modern contemporary feminist perspective which is contrary to the beliefs of ancient India, which changes the context and intentions behind the scenario due to the varying contexts it is compared to.

In VedaVyasa's *Jaya* (also known as the *Mahabharata*), the story of Eklavya is a tragedy of social castes and beliefs, playing into the individualistic perceptions of dharma. A simple tribe boy, Eklavya, had long since dreamt of learning archery under the great sage Dronacharya, also known as Drona. However, he had been denied education due to his low social class. Determined, Eklavya carved the visage of Drona from a tree and—treating it as a replacement for the real Drona—would spy on the sage's lessons with the Pandavas and Kauravas and practice on his own. Upon discovering the spring of talent in Eklavya, Drona was conflicted. With the justification that young Eklavya had made use of the sage's teachings without paying a *gurudakshin* (a tribute of payment to the mentor for one's education), the young man's thumb was demanded as payment, ridding the devout and talented Eklavya of the opportunity to ever shoot an arrow again.

Social and cultural beliefs of the time stated that knowledge was restricted and not to be shared beyond one's caste. Another belief of the time was the idealization of a mentor or a teacher and the god-like status they were given, with the teachers granted full rights over their disciples. This was such a strong belief of its time that it is still prevalent in modern-day Indian society. Thus, it must be noted that these retellings represent the social values of the time with changes made to fit in with the new social values; serving as a way to examine the changing shifts in the evolution of social values.

THE REFLECTION AND EVOLUTION OF NARRATIVES IN MYTHICAL RETELLINGS

It is observed that myths are not static, but always changing. Through mythical retellings, the traditional narratives presented by these myths are examined from a contemporary perspective, questioned and explored (Singh, 2017). Marginalised voices like Sita, Kaikeyi, Ahalya, Urmila and Draupadi, who are frequently restrained by the male-dominant conservative and patriarchal lens through which their stories are seen, now gain new voices through retellings such as *The Warrior of Mithila*, *Kaikeyi*, *Ahalya*, *Sita's Sister* and *The Palace of Illusions*. In Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*, the notorious Duryodhana is viewed from a perspective that uniquely contrasts the sinful perceptions made and enforced upon his character within VedaVyasa's *Mahabharata*. One could argue that as Vyasa had claimed to have been the biological grandfather of the Pandavas, the Duryodhana presented with his words must undoubtedly be influenced by the subconscious rapport and positive assumptions cast towards the Pandavas despite the lack of contact the sage had maintained with the royal family until they had dwindled to its last surviving member of a once proud dynasty; however, Vyasa was proud and solemn in his promise to be unbiased in his accounting of the events that had taken place, and it is the retellings that come afterwards that resulted in the warping of Duryodhana as a one-dimensional antagonist. In fact, until the arrival of the Pandavas and his eventual decline due to greed and jealousy, Duryodhana had been Suyodhana, the beloved crown prince of Hastinapura (Duryodhana, Vyasa *Mahabharata*). This narrative is brought back to the modern contemporary audience through Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*.

As these retold narratives were passed down through oral storytelling for the greater half of the millennia, the surviving narratives are patchworks of the memories of thousands of minds and interpretations. Due to the limits of human memory, there are always details that are ignored or skipped over. In fact, it is unlikely that Valmiki's *Ramayana* is the original narrative of the events that took place, although it can be debated that, as the earliest version that survives, it is perhaps closest to what the true narrative essence might have been. It must be noted that as a narrative spread all over Asia, the origin of the spread of the *Ramayana* is a mystery that lends to the theory that Valmiki's *Ramayana* was simply the first *written* retelling of the story. Due to the unreliability of human memory, change is a constant in mythical retellings. Characters like Kaikeyi, Ahalya, Mandhodari and Raavana are interpreted through a newer lens that has the readers review, refresh and recreate the tales they grew up with from dynamically contrasting perspectives.

Mythical retellings also provide new narratives that are added to the original narrative of the mythologies that one grows up with. The uncrossable magical line drawn on the soil across the hut-house to protect Sita by Lakshmana, Ram's brother is a motif one would believe is an infamous feature of the *Ramayana*. However, despite this motif having had no mention in Valmiki's *Ramayana* or the popular *Ramcharitamanas*, its introduction through the Bengali retelling called *Krittivasi Ramayana* has resulted in the motif being a classic part of the myth such that one cannot imagine it not being part of the original myth (Mohanty, *Should Mythology Be Left Alone, or Do Retellings Serve a Purpose?*).

By serving as a medium to provide meaning to certain events and actions that took place within the narratives, as well as mediating as a tool to guide the audience through social, cultural and contextual beliefs and circumstances, mythical retellings reflect the thoughts and actions of the society from the time it is being rewritten and are products of their times.

THE INFLUENCE OF RETELLINGS ON INDIA'S NATIONAL IDENTITY AND UNITY

It is the 19th century and the British have won control over India. Their influence continues to grow and there is an urgent need for the people of India to unify and fight back against the foreigners seeking to exploit their land and its people. From 1857 to 1947, this urge resulted in a series of historic movements with the ultimate aim of ending the British reign in India. A tool in guiding the course of history, mythology influenced thinkers like Gandhi and Tilak and inspired artists by providing themes for their nationalist visions (Kumar, 128). This resulted in an abundance of mythical retellings and recreations that started with theatre and spread to other mediums of art, aiding in the mission to forge unity and national identity in India during the Independence movement. Although theatre has been a part of India since ancient times, modern Indian theatre began in the 18th century. The Indian theaters had been experimenting with the retelling of myths long before the arrival of the British in India; however, the Independence movement resulted in the embedding of nationalist messages and visions within the familiar narratives, repurposed to provide shared cultural heritage and a sense of unity amidst the diverse population even as it brings together people for the cause of a Free India.

'Buro Shalikhher Ghaare Roa (1860)' was one of the earliest Indian plays, written in Bengali by Michael Madhusudan Duth. A Bengali play by Dinabandhu Mitra won both accolades and controversies for depicting the horror and tragedies of Indigo cultivation in rural Bengal, playing a major role in the Indigo revolt. Rabindranath Tagore's plays explored and questioned nationalism, identity, spiritualism and material greed through plays like *Chitrangada* (1892) and *King of the Dark Chamber* (Raja, 1910). The British believed that Indian actors were mystical creatures that brought them luck and prosperity, so Indian theaters continued to flourish. As newspapers advocated for theaters to act as '*vehicles of social reform*' and the Indian nationalist theatre gained momentum, the British tried to enact ordinances such as the Dramatic Performance Art (1876) to keep a check on the revolutionary impulses of Indian theatre.

Despite such attempts at silencing its colonized populace, the ongoing theatrical activity that flourished in the late-nineteenth century and continued well into the twentieth century, as anti-colonial nationalist activity intensified, shows that the suppression of theatre was a battle that the colonial government never fully won (Kumar, 129(6)). As the British censor board paid little attention to the mythical and religious plays, mythical retellings were restructured from a nationalist perspective to further the agenda of the rebelling Indians. They

were major successes and garnered a large audience due to the familiarity of the Indians with the myths that were performed in theatre.

CONTEMPORARY TRENDS DEVELOPED IN INDIAN MYTHICAL RETELLINGS

Having settled into its comfortable niche in contemporary literature, Indian mythical retellings have emerged as a vibrant and innovative genre brimming with potential, offering new life to the existing narratives that have become an intrinsic aspect of the country's cultural fabric. While heavily influenced and woven from the rich tapestry of Indian mythology, the restructuring of these narratives goes beyond rehashing of the past and serves as the changing reflections of contemporary society. A notable trend in these modern interpretations is the re-imagining of traditional gender roles and the significant emphasis on gender fluidity. In *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen* and *The Palace of Illusions*, the traditionally patriarchal narratives are challenged and feminist perspectives are on the rise, as seen with the changing interpretations of Mandodhari, Satyawati, Draupadi, Sita and Kunti: figures who are often ignored or overshadowed within the narratives. These reimaginings from fresh and unique perspectives, as seen in the works of Anand Neelakantan and Koral Dasgupta, attract a wide readership from both inside and outside India. By incorporating elements of fantasy and adventure to appeal to the younger audiences, as accomplished in *The Immortals of Meluha* trilogy, the readership percentage for this niche genre increases as the less literary-inclined readers are attracted to the simpler, contemporary style of writing.

The retellings of myths through more visual mediums like graphic novels, television dramas, cartoon shows and films bring in eager viewership from an entirely different bracket of audiences. *Mayabazaar* (1957) and *Meera* (2009-2010) serve as examples of a film and a television drama respectively that won the hearts of a different spectrum of audiences and increased the appeal of mythical retellings within the country. In the present day, cartoon shows like *Roll No. 21* and *Little Krishna* open mythical retellings to a younger audience, playing a role in keeping the mythologies alive.

The utilization of experimentation in literary forms and genres has resulted in fascinating narratives that appeal to audiences from all walks of life. By revitalizing the mythological canon, timeless stories are introduced to a new generation in styles and beliefs that align closely with contemporary sensibilities.

CONCLUSION

Mythical retellings are not merely re-enactments of old tales, but dynamic and evolving art forms that reflect the ongoing conversation between the past, present and future in Indian society. Through the reinterpretation and adaptation of ancient narratives, the actively changing structures will transmit cultural heritage, engage in contemporary issues and challenge social norms. Mythical retellings have played a large role in maintaining the significance and influence of myths within Indian society. As India continues to grow and evolve, these retold narratives are expected to continue their dynamic journey of change and play a vital role in shaping cultural identity, serving as a platform for social commentary and awareness, and fostering a deep understanding of rich and complex pasts.

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