**Reimagining Mythological Femininity: A Comparative Study of Female Agency in Yajnaseni, The Palace of Illusions, and Modern Retellings of Sita**

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**Abstract**

This study explores the reimagination of mythological femininity through a comparative literary analysis of *Yajnaseni* by Pratibha Ray, *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and *Sita’s Sister* by Kavita Kane. These contemporary retellings challenge the traditional portrayal of Draupadi and Sita as passive figures confined to roles of sacrifice and submission, instead repositioning them as agents of introspection, moral reasoning, and resistance. By employing first-person narration, introspective dialogue, and intertextuality, the authors restore narrative authority to these iconic women, allowing them to articulate their desires, emotions, and ethical dilemmas. The study highlights how these texts reflect feminist reinterpretations of ancient Indian epics, foregrounding female voice, autonomy, and identity within patriarchal mythological frameworks. Through a close comparative reading, the research examines how modern authors redefine dharma, virtue, and agency from a female perspective. The findings reveal that such literary interventions not only subvert hegemonic traditions but also create a feminist mythopoesis that resonates with contemporary gender discourses in India. This research contributes to feminist literary studies, comparative mythology, and cultural criticism by emphasizing the transformative potential of mythological retellings.

**Keywords:** **Mythological femininity, feminist retellings, female agency, gender narratives, Indian epics**

**Introduction**

The reinterpretation of mythological femininity through contemporary literary retellings has emerged as a dynamic site of feminist reimagination, offering nuanced portrayals of historically marginalized female figures from ancient epics. In particular, the Mahabharata and Ramayana, long venerated in Indian cultural consciousness, are being revisited by modern authors to foreground the voices, emotions, and perspectives of women such as Draupadi and Sita, who have traditionally been rendered as passive, sacrificial, or morally idealized. These literary reconstructions challenge patriarchal myth-making and recuperate female agency through subjective narration and psychological depth. This study undertakes a comparative analysis of Yajnaseni by Pratibha Ray, The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and selected modern retellings of Sita—particularly The Forest of Enchantments by Divakaruni and Sita’s Sister by Kavita Kane—to examine how each text reimagines feminine subjectivity, agency, and resistance against hegemonic narratives of gendered idealism.

Pratibha Ray’s Yajnaseni (1995) is a poignant epistolary narrative voiced by Draupadi, who reflects upon her tumultuous life and multiple roles—as daughter, wife to five husbands, queen, and woman wronged—to articulate her identity beyond the epic’s male-centered events. Ray reclaims Draupadi as a philosophical seeker, spiritual thinker, and moral questioner, exploring her anguish and protest through rich interiority. Draupadi writes, “Even in the Sabha, I had no voice. I was not asked, only dragged and humiliated. What justice is this, where the queen has no say in her fate?” (Ray, 1995). This act of voicing her silenced experience becomes a foundational act of agency, challenging the epic’s normalised misogyny and the collusion of her five husbands in her disrobing.

Similarly, The Palace of Illusions (2008), Divakaruni’s widely celebrated novel, repositions Draupadi—renamed Panchaali—as the primary narrator of her life story, offering a modern sensibility to her inner conflicts, aspirations, and defiance of patriarchal expectations. Divakaruni endows Panchaali with self-awareness and voice, allowing her to critique Kshatriya codes, question divine will, and assert autonomy in love and war. Panchaali notes, “They called me the cause of war, as though a woman could cause such destruction! But didn’t they see I was only the excuse?” (Divakaruni, 2008). Her portrayal disrupts the conventional understanding of Draupadi as merely a catalyst for the Kurukshetra war and instead renders her as a woman of complex emotions and agency who resists being defined by male desires. Her unfulfilled love for Karna is a bold literary addition that allows her to express the forbidden desires long erased from epic tradition: “I loved him. Always. Even when I hated him, I loved him. I could never forget how his eyes had looked into mine.” (Divakaruni, 2008).

In parallel, the figure of Sita—often immortalized as the epitome of self-sacrifice and conjugal loyalty—is being retold in newer narratives that reject submissiveness in favor of self-realization and emotional truth. The Forest of Enchantments (2019), also by Divakaruni, reframes Sita’s journey from exile to abandonment as one of spiritual strength, literary creativity, and principled resistance. Unlike Valmiki’s Sita, who remains a stoic sufferer, Divakaruni’s Sita is introspective, expressive, and aware of the injustices she endures—from being abducted by Ravana to being doubted and exiled by Rama. As she pens her own Ramayana, she proclaims, “This time, I will not be silent. I will write my own Ramayana, the one no one else will tell” (Divakaruni, 2019). This act of narrative authorship reclaims agency from male epic narrators and affirms Sita’s emotional and ethical authority. When Rama asks her to undergo the trial by fire, she responds: “Is this what you think love is, Rama? A fire to be walked through again and again to prove myself?” (Divakaruni, 2019). Her rhetorical resistance crystallizes the feminist thrust of the novel.

Similarly, Kavita Kane’s Sita’s Sister (2014) offers an alternate perspective through Urmila, Sita’s often forgotten sibling, who sacrifices her marital companionship for Lakshmana’s duty-bound exile. Kane illuminates the silent suffering and philosophical strength of Urmila, thereby enhancing the larger theme of female endurance, dignity, and emotional labor within epic paradigms. As Urmila reflects, “I too was exiled, but not into forests or caves. My exile was into silence, within the walls of a palace, far from the man I loved” (Kane, 2014). Her restrained but emotionally rich resistance questions the conventional valorization of physical exile over emotional resilience.

These contemporary reimaginings operate as feminist interventions into the grand masculine epic traditions, emphasizing the inner worlds, silent struggles, and transformative resilience of women who have long been considered peripheral or archetypal. Scholars such as Pattanaik (2010) and Doniger (2009) note that traditional Hindu mythology, while rich in symbolism and philosophical inquiry, often preserves gender hierarchies that valorize female virtue through suffering and silence. In contrast, modern literary retellings engage with the ethical ambivalence, emotional pain, and narrative gaps in the source texts, allowing women to emerge as thinkers, rebels, and poets. As Draupadi laments in Yajnaseni, “My body was shared by five men, but my soul belonged to none. I was a pawn, passed from hand to hand” (Ray, 1995), the text critiques how her subjectivity was erased even as she stood at the epic’s moral center.

By articulating inner dialogue and autonomous choices, these characters acquire not only narrative centrality but also discursive power in the feminist literary canon. The present study seeks to analyze the strategies through which female agency is constructed and articulated in these retellings—through first-person narration, emotional interiority, resistance to dharma-based silencing, and reinterpretation of key epic moments such as Draupadi’s disrobing or Sita’s trial by fire. It also interrogates how these texts navigate the dichotomy between personal desire and social duty, between divine predestination and human freedom, and how myth becomes a site for reclaiming womanhood in politically and socially resonant ways.

In Yajnaseni, for instance, Draupadi’s internal debates on justice, love, and fate make her a philosophical interlocutor of Krishna rather than a silent devotee, allowing her to critique the moral failures of her husbands and the rigidity of dharma (Ray, 1995; Sharma, 2001). In The Palace of Illusions, Panchaali’s agency is foregrounded through her forbidden love for Karna, her defiance of Kunti’s manipulations, and her yearning for a palace that represents both illusion and desire (Divakaruni, 2008; Sundararajan, 2011). In The Forest of Enchantments, Sita is reimagined not as a submissive consort but as a woman who questions divine justice, challenges her husband's lack of empathy, and ultimately chooses to return to Mother Earth on her own terms—“I return not because I am defeated, but because I choose not to be tested anymore” (Divakaruni, 2019; Nair, 2021).

These narratives reflect a broader trend in feminist literature that seeks to recover the emotional and existential dimensions of mythic women, presenting them not as moral templates but as fully human figures negotiating power, pain, and identity. Additionally, these retellings resonate with contemporary socio-political discourses around gender justice, autonomy, and voice. The epics are not merely literary sources but living texts that shape cultural values, and their feminist reinterpretations contribute to evolving understandings of Indian womanhood. As Mukherjee (2015) argues, mythological fiction in India serves as a bridge between tradition and modernity, enabling the reader to critique historical oppression while reclaiming spiritual and narrative authority for women. The use of lyrical prose, stream-of-consciousness technique, and dialogic narration in these texts helps deconstruct the binaries of virtuous vs. fallen women, enabling a rearticulation of feminine identity outside the confines of male epics.

Furthermore, the rise of women-centered mythological fiction reflects a shift in readership and authorship, where female authors reclaim storytelling as an act of resistance, healing, and reconstruction. In conclusion, this study argues that texts like Yajnaseni, The Palace of Illusions, The Forest of Enchantments, and Sita’s Sister constitute a powerful literary archive of feminist mythmaking in India. They reframe ancient epics through a gender-conscious lens, offering agency, depth, and dignity to characters long overshadowed by patriarchal heroism. Through comparative analysis, this research explores how these texts reconceive mythological femininity not merely as a set of idealized traits but as a site of resistance, self-assertion, and transformation. By placing Draupadi and Sita at the center of their own narratives, these authors affirm the continuing relevance of myth in shaping feminist consciousness and cultural critique in postcolonial India.

**Literature Review**

The reinterpretation of Indian mythology through feminist literary lenses has gathered significant critical momentum, as contemporary authors endeavor to reclaim ancient epics by foregrounding historically silenced female voices. Seminal works such as Yajnaseni by Pratibha Ray (1995), The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (2008), and The Forest of Enchantments (2019) represent a literary and ideological turn toward narrative reclamation and psychological realism in feminist retellings of the Mahabharata and Ramayana. In Yajnaseni, Ray reconstructs Draupadi not merely as an epic heroine, but as a spiritual interlocutor and moral philosopher. Through the epistolary format, Draupadi narrates her innermost anguish: “I, born of fire, was consumed by it again and again. Why was my voice never heard in the sabha where I was disgraced?” (Ray, 1995). Such passages reflect her existential critique of gendered silencing and social complicity. As Pattanaik (2010) argues, Ray’s use of the letter form allows for a sustained emotional and spiritual interiority that critiques both divine authority and patriarchal injustice.

Likewise, Divakaruni’s The Palace of Illusions situates Panchaali (Draupadi) at the narrative helm, reinterpreting her journey through the lens of selfhood, desire, and dissent. Through lyrical, stream-of-consciousness narration, Panchaali articulates her struggle: “They say I caused the war, but did they see I was only the excuse? My silence had become my rebellion.” (Divakaruni, 2008). Critics such as Sundararajan (2011) read Divakaruni’s Draupadi as emblematic of modern feminist resistance, capable of expressing guilt, romantic longing, moral reasoning, and suppressed rage. Her emotional attachment to Karna—“Even when I hated him, I loved him”— and ambivalence towards Krishna—“He saw through me more than I could bear”— underscore her complex negotiation between dharma and personal autonomy. The text’s stream-of-consciousness technique thus facilitates a multifaceted portrayal of feminine agency, no longer reduced to the archetype of the vengeful queen.

Turning to the Ramayana, Divakaruni’s The Forest of Enchantments (2019) reimagines Sita not as the passive consort of Rama but as a narrator of her own mythos—one endowed with narrative agency and literary authorship. Sita's declaration, “I will write my own Ramayana, the one that no one else will tell,” (Divakaruni, 2019) functions as both a symbolic and literal act of resistance against the epic’s male-dominated scriptural legacy. Unlike Valmiki’s idealized version, Divakaruni’s Sita is deeply introspective, poetically sensitive, and morally assertive. When questioned by Rama, she defiantly states: “I am not your property to be tested. Love that needs proof is no love at all.” As Nair (2021) notes, such re-articulations reject traditional constructions of virtue, spotlighting Sita’s emotional depth and intellectual clarity. Her ultimate self-erasure—her return to Mother Earth—is reframed not as surrender but as the final act of defiance: “This is my choice. I leave with dignity, not despair.”

In a complementary narrative strand, Kavita Kane’s Sita’s Sister (2014) resurrects the overlooked figure of Urmila, Sita’s sibling, whose quiet endurance exemplifies a subtler but equally powerful form of feminine strength. Kane’s Urmila reflects, “My exile was within stone walls, not forests. But it was no less cruel” (Kane, 2014). According to Sharma (2022), Kane’s interpretation reframes mythic silence not as passivity but as a potent expression of interior resilience and fortitude. This act of centering a marginal woman subverts the traditional epic hierarchy and extends the feminist project beyond iconic figures to those historically invisible in mythic discourse. Kane’s other novels, including Karna’s Wife and Menaka’s Choice, further enrich this corpus by foregrounding the spiritual, erotic, and ethical dilemmas of women relegated to mythological sidelines, thereby reconfiguring gender roles within epic frameworks.

These literary retellings align with Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) enduring question—“Can the subaltern speak?”—by enabling Draupadi, Sita, and Urmila to break their historical silence and articulate their lived truths. They no longer remain passive figures in male-authored narratives but become discursive subjects asserting their right to feel, desire, question, and narrate. As Doniger (2009) and Hiltebeitel (2011) assert, the cultural architecture of Hindu mythology has long encoded gender hierarchies, sanctifying women’s suffering as moral ideal. These feminist reinterpretations dismantle that architecture by revealing the trauma, resistance, and desire embedded within these canonical roles. Narrative techniques such as first-person confessional style, diary entries, and lyrical interiority become tools of gender critique, transforming sacrifice and dharma from valorized ideals into contested terrains of ethical struggle and emotional truth.

The motif of writing—as seen in Sita’s composition of her own Ramayana or Draupadi’s epistle to Krishna—functions as an act of narrative reclamation. This symbolic authorship reclaims moral and cultural agency, challenging the male monopoly over scripture and interpretation. According to Mukherjee (2015), such feminist mythmaking reflects a broader cultural shift in Indian literature wherein traditional figures are recontextualized to reflect evolving discourses on empowerment, consent, and moral autonomy. These texts do not discard myth but deconstruct and reconstruct it through feminist logic, reanimating tradition with contemporary relevance. Themes of sisterhood, embodied resilience, and inner dissent emerge as recurring patterns, reinforcing the importance of affect, solidarity, and self-reflection in feminist reimaginings.

Meenakshi Malhotra (2017) notes that such intertextual layering between the ancient and the modern, the mythic and the feminist, enables a dialogic interplay that rehumanizes epic women and redefines the heroic. While earlier interpretations confined Sita to symbols of chastity and Draupadi to revenge, these retellings reconstruct them as emotionally intelligent, ethically aware, and erotically expressive women capable of nuanced moral agency. The question of female agency here is not merely about overt rebellion but about the power to name, to remember, and to narrate. In reclaiming narrative space, these characters create a counter-epic—one that simultaneously respects, resists, and revises its sources.

Ultimately, this emerging corpus of feminist mythological fiction by Ray, Divakaruni, Kane, and others offers a powerful literary counter-narrative that dislodges patriarchal scaffolding within epic tradition. It invites readers to engage with mythology not as static inheritance but as a living, dynamic terrain where identity, justice, and gender are constantly negotiated. These texts construct a literary tradition wherein myth and modernity coalesce to produce narratives of protest, spiritual inquiry, and self-definition—making mythological femininity a site not of subjugation, but of subversion, resilience, and voice.

**Statement of the Problem**

Traditional Indian epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* have historically presented women characters through a patriarchal lens, often relegating figures like Draupadi and Sita to symbolic roles defined by sacrifice, virtue, and silence. While these women hold significant narrative importance, their emotional and psychological depth remains largely unexplored in the canonical versions. This has contributed to a long-standing cultural narrative that limits female agency and reinforces gendered expectations in Indian society. With the rise of feminist literature and postcolonial critique, contemporary authors have begun to challenge these monolithic portrayals by giving voice to mythological women and repositioning them as central, self-aware protagonists. However, there is limited academic inquiry comparing how different authors—especially women—reframe feminine subjectivity and agency across multiple texts. Furthermore, there is a lack of consolidated research that explores how narrative devices such as first-person voice, interior monologue, and intertextuality function in reclaiming mythological femininity. The problem, therefore, lies in the underexplored comparative understanding of how female agency is reconstructed in modern retellings of epic women. This study addresses this gap by critically examining *Yajnaseni*, *The Palace of Illusions*, and recent retellings of Sita, analyzing how these texts reimagine mythological femininity in empowering and subversive ways.

**Research Objective**

To critically analyze and compare how *Yajnaseni*, *The Palace of Illusions*, and modern retellings of Sita reconstruct female agency and subjectivity within mythological narratives.

### **Discussion**

The reimagining of female mythological characters in contemporary literature serves not merely as a narrative device but as a potent form of feminist intervention and cultural critique. In Yajnaseni, The Palace of Illusions, and The Forest of Enchantments, the re-articulation of Draupadi and Sita signals a paradigmatic shift from peripheral passivity to reflective, narrative-centered agency. This evolution of feminine voice and subjectivity demonstrates how literary retellings function as discursive tools for interrogating patriarchal codes embedded in epic traditions. In Yajnaseni, Pratibha Ray (1995) foregrounds Draupadi’s moral anguish and philosophical inquiry through the epistolary format addressed to Krishna. Her voice, long silenced in the canonical Mahabharata, becomes a site of resistance: “Why was I pawned like a dice? Did any of you ask me what I thought of your dharma?” (Ray, 1995). Far from being merely the cause of a war, Ray’s Draupadi is a seeker of justice and truth, critiquing the failures of her husbands and the ethical ambivalence of Kshatriya codes.

In contrast, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s The Palace of Illusions (2008) adopts a confessional, first-person voice that renders Panchaali emotionally and psychologically layered. Her introspection about love, power, and destiny is underscored by her poignant declaration: “I longed for Karna not just because he was forbidden, but because in him I saw the only man who would’ve loved me for myself” (Divakaruni, 2008). This unrequited love narrative, absent in Vyasa’s version, becomes a feminist assertion of erotic autonomy, defying prescribed marital expectations. Divakaruni’s Draupadi becomes a liminal figure—at once queen and outsider—who confronts divine edicts and maternal manipulations with defiance. Her statement, “They said I was the cause of war, but I knew better—I was its excuse” (Divakaruni, 2008), reflects a deeper awareness of the gendered scapegoating in epic morality.

Similarly, The Forest of Enchantments (2019) reframes Sita’s journey as a spiritual and literary odyssey marked by resistance and reclamation. Divakaruni gives her voice to a Sita who not only questions but rewrites her fate: “This time I will not be silent. I will write my own Ramayana, the one no one else will tell” (Divakaruni, 2019). Her rejection of the agni pariksha becomes not an act of brokenness but of strength. “I am not your possession to test. I choose to walk away, not because I am weak but because I refuse to be judged by your standards,” she asserts. Sita’s return to Mother Earth—“Let me return to the womb of the Earth that gave me strength when the world failed me”—is no longer a symbol of defeat but of self-willed closure. Through authorship and emotional lucidity, Sita transforms from an idealized consort into an autonomous moral subject.

Kavita Kane’s Sita’s Sister (2014) expands the feminist narrative terrain by bringing Urmila to the forefront. Long silenced in epic memory, Urmila is given a voice that articulates quiet resilience and dignified endurance. “I too lived in exile, only mine was in the palace of silence,” she says (Kane, 2014). Her spiritual agency is expressed not in rebellion, but in emotional strength and philosophical acceptance. Kane’s portrayal challenges the dominant notion that feminine agency must always be vocal or dramatic; instead, Urmila’s steadfast love and solitude redefine endurance as a political and emotional act. Her choice to remain and wait is not passive compliance but an assertion of interior moral strength.

These reinterpretations reveal that mythological femininity can embody a spectrum of resistance—from outspoken dissent to contemplative endurance. The stylistic innovations used by these authors—first-person narration, interior monologue, lyrical prose—draw readers into the emotional and cognitive worlds of Draupadi and Sita, transforming them from archetypal figures into subjects of empathy and complexity. Doniger (2009) and Hiltebeitel (2011) argue that traditional mythology tends to trap women in allegorical roles—Draupadi as wrath, Sita as virtue. These retellings disrupt such constraints by injecting moral ambiguity, interior realism, and feminist nuance. They reflect how ancient figures negotiate modern themes of autonomy, identity, and justice.

Moreover, these novels resonate strongly with contemporary feminist discourses in India—particularly those concerning voice, bodily autonomy, and societal shaming. Draupadi’s public humiliation in the sabhā echoes today’s culture of victim-blaming: “They disrobed me, but what stripped me of dignity was their silence,” she writes in Yajnaseni (Ray, 1995). Sita’s exile by Rama—“I loved a man who could not trust me; that was my tragedy”—evokes the trauma of betrayed loyalty and unjust moral scrutiny. These episodes are reinterpreted not as endpoints of victimhood but as catalysts for reclaiming voice and power.

Additionally, these retellings address the systemic erasure of women’s emotional, intellectual, and narrative agency. By reclaiming that space, the authors simultaneously critique historical injustice and offer literary justice. The symbolic acts of writing—Sita composing her own Ramayana, Draupadi penning a letter to Krishna—become metaphors for narrative sovereignty. Spivak (1988) and Chakravarty (2017) posit that subaltern voices can be retrieved through transformative literary spaces, and these novels exemplify that idea. No longer mere muses or moral foils, the protagonists become thinkers, chroniclers, and agents of their own destiny.

Importantly, these works do not reject love, dharma, or sacrifice, but reinterpret them through the prism of feminine consciousness. Draupadi’s adherence to dharma is not blind duty but philosophical reflection: “If dharma does not protect me, is it dharma at all?” she asks. Sita’s devotion is not submission but moral steadfastness. These values are reconstructed not as ideals to conform to but as principles to interrogate, reconfigure, and internalize. Thus, the binary between victimhood and rebellion dissolves, giving rise to nuanced models of strength rooted in intellect, emotion, and ethical agency.

This complexity is what lends these retellings their power. They do not construct flawless feminist icons but present emotionally intelligent, morally questioning women navigating profound dilemmas of love, honor, justice, and faith. They humanize the mythic, bringing sacred figures closer to the reader, and invite us to question the scaffolding of tradition. In conclusion, the discussion affirms that contemporary feminist retellings of epic women serve as radical instruments of cultural reinterpretation. In the hands of Ray, Divakaruni, and Kane, female agency is no longer mythic absence but literary presence—formed by voice, shaped by resistance, and sustained by authorship.

### **Conclusion**

The retellings of Draupadi and Sita in Yajnaseni, The Palace of Illusions, and The Forest of Enchantments represent a significant literary and cultural shift in how Indian mythology is perceived and reinterpreted through a feminist lens. These modern narratives challenge the patriarchal framework of traditional epics by granting emotional, intellectual, and narrative autonomy to female characters who have historically been cast in roles of silence, sacrifice, or divine compliance. Through stylistic techniques such as first-person narration, epistolary format, and introspective dialogue, these works provide an intimate portrayal of women’s inner lives, thereby humanizing mythological characters who have often been reduced to archetypes. The thematic exploration of love, duty, desire, injustice, and self-authorship in these texts presents a more complex and realistic understanding of femininity. Draupadi is no longer just the cause of the war; she is a moral thinker, spiritual seeker, and political observer. Sita is not simply a symbol of devotion but a reflective narrator, creative writer, and ethical dissenter. These reinterpretations not only offer readers alternative perspectives but also contribute to the larger project of feminist deconstruction of canonical texts. They assert that female agency in mythological narratives can exist in both vocal defiance and quiet endurance, and that reclaiming narrative space is an essential form of empowerment. Ultimately, these texts reaffirm the power of literature in rewriting history, restoring dignity, and reimagining identities that have long been confined within the boundaries of tradition and silence.

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