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MYTHICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN MODERN WOMEN'S WRITINGS: RE-VISITING AND RE- TELLING THE MYTHS FROM WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Women writers in the present times are contributing to the canon of women's writing in a great way across the globe. Their writings are unique with the exploration of the female self that has been neglected for the centuries together. Female identity and the gender constructions being the chief concerns of these writers, no stone is unturned by them to prove that women were the silenced species in the shackles of patriarchy. Especially in the post-feminist age, the transnational feminism is more concerned with the subversion of the female identities created by male authors from their point of view. The women writers, endowed with mythical consciousness, are much more intended to bring out the politics of patriarchy by re-visiting the myths created about the women in the modern literature. Against this backdrop, this paper explores the concept of mythical consciousness in modern women's writing, with a focus on the ways in which women writers re-visit and re-tell myths from a feminist perspective. Drawing on a range of texts, including works by authors such as Mahasweta Devi, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, Volga, Prathibha Re and Chithra Benerjee Divakaruni, this paper argues that modern women's writing offers a powerful challenge to traditional mythological narratives, which have often been used to reinforce patriarchal values and marginalize women's experiences. By re-claiming and re-interpreting myths from a women's perspective, these writers create new spaces for feminist resistance, subversion, and empowerment. This paper will examine the ways in which mythical consciousness is used in modern women's writing to challenge dominant narratives, reclaim women's histories, and imagine alternative futures.

Keywords: mythical consciousness, modern women's writing, feminist perspective, re-claiming myths, subversion, empowerment.

Mythology has long been a powerful tool for shaping cultural narratives and reinforcing social norms. As a cultural repository, it has long shaped gender roles, moral systems, and collective consciousness. Traditionally told and preserved through male-dominated structures, myths often marginalize or vilify female characters and silence women's voices. However, modern women writers are reclaiming these narratives, reinterpreting mythic figures to voice silenced subjectivities and offer alternate visions of female identity, agency, and resistance. The female characters in the mythologies have been created by male writers just as they wanted women to be, as inferior to men and created them in such a way that they will remain as ideal characters for the other women. The culture prescribes mythical characters like Gandhari, Sita, Savithri, Anasuya, Draupadi and many others as role models to women to lead a happy life by following the footsteps of patriarchy without questioning the injustice meted out to these characters. In response, many modern women writers have sought to re-claim and re-interpret myths from a feminist perspective.

Mythical consciousness refers to the interpretive awareness of myth as both a cultural construct and a symbolic language through which human experience is mediated. For feminist writers, this consciousness becomes a powerful tool for challenging dominant paradigms. Myths are not static; they are living stories capable of adaptation. Feminist revisionism allows women writers to transform myth into a space of reclamation and reinterpretation. This process involves both deconstruction of traditional roles and reconstruction of new meanings and perspectives.

There are many women writers across the world being very conscious about the myths and their role in molding the female sensibilities. Their mythical consciousness is acting as a tool for providing enough evidence that the gender has been an artificially constructed for the times immemorial.

There are many women writers who could question the portrayal of women characters and illogical incidents in the epic writings in regional languages. To cite a few, the writer Ranganayakamma, a Telugu feminist writer has re-written the



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Mahabharatha as “Idandi Mahabharatham”(This is the Mahabharatham) and the Ramayana as “Ramayana VishaVriksham” (Ramayana, the poison tree) . Smita Agarwal’s poem, “Lopamudra”, Revathy Gopal’s “Yashodhra II” , Mallika Sengupta and Nabaneeta Dev Sen both of whom write in Bengali. This paper focuses on the mythical consciousness in the writings of Margaret Atwood, Helen Cixous, Chithra Banerji Divakaruni, Pratibha Ray, Volga among the prominent women writers in the modern and post-modern times who have re-written the mythologies from women’s perspectives.

Margaret Atwood’s poetry and prose often reimagine classical mythological figures. In "Siren Song," Atwood gives voice to the siren, subverting the trope of the dangerous seductress. The siren laments her role and manipulation, symbolizing the entrapment of women in their own stereotypes. Told from the perspective of a siren—a half-woman, half-bird creature from Greek mythology whose singing lures sailors to their deaths. She writes;

the song that forces men
 to leap overboard in squadrons
 even though they see the beached skulls
 the song nobody knows
 because anyone who has heard it
 is dead, and the others can't remember. he song nobody knows
 because anyone who has heard it
 is dead, and the others can't remember.
 Shall I tell you the secret
 and if I do, will you get me
 out of this bird suit?
 I don't enjoy it here
 squatting on this island
 looking picturesque and mythical
 with these two feathery maniacs,
 I don't enjoy singing
 this trio, fatal and valuable.
 I will tell the secret to you,
 to you, only to you.
 Come closer.
 This song



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is a cry for help: Help me!

Only you, only you can,

you are unique at last.

Alas

it is a boring song

but it works every time.

The poem explores themes of vanity and seduction, stereotypes about women being helpless, and how the need to feel "unique" makes people vulnerable to flattery. On another level, "Siren Song" also examines the ways in which traditional gender expectations can trap people, pushing them to perform isolating, lonely roles.

Also, in "The Penelopiad," Atwood retells *The Odyssey* from Penelope's perspective, highlighting the gendered double standards and injustices. The twelve maids, hanged for supposed disloyalty, become a chorus lamenting their fate—a commentary on class, power, and gender. Atwood reclaims narrative space for women traditionally sidelined, exposing the myth's embedded sexism and rewriting it with empathy and critique.

Atwood proves herself as a writer endowed with the consciousness of myth and the consciousness about the predicament of women as well. Her re-telling of the myth of the construction of Penelope and de-constructing it is certainly a great attempt to create an awareness among women that their identities are always artificially constructed. Atwood's excavation and adaptation of the ancient myth of Penelope results in a highly experimental text in which she not only "liberates the epic story from its generic constraints", but also liberates Penelope and her twelve maids from "the limitations imposed on them by the traditional narratives" (Steals). Thus Penelope deconstructs the gender stereotypes, boundaries and spaces through her narrative of the novella. She surpasses and transcends the passive, submissive, silent stereotype of the feminine identity.

Helen Cixious, the French post-structural feminist philosopher also uses the myth of Medusa to reclaim the agency and to counter the already established women identities in an artificial manner by the patriarchal norms. It is quite evident that the evil nature and awful appearance attributed to women in the mythologies made women to go scary and develop a negative impression about the other women. Women's bodies were created in such a way women were afraid of looking at their own bodies. Medusa is also a mythical figure with the snakes all over her head and very disgusting. Central to Cixious' argument in "The Laugh of the Medusa" is the idea that women must embrace their bodies as sources of power and expression. She contends that the repression of the female body has led to the suppression of women's voices. She proposes 'écriture feminine' or body writing without any inhibition. Through writing, women can reconnect with their bodies, reclaim their desires, and challenge the societal norms that have sought to control them. She argues that traditional language and literature have been dominated by male perspectives, marginalizing women's voices. By writing from their own experiences, women can create a new, authentic narrative that reflects their realities. Cixious says that Medusa looks beautiful if at all we want to look at her and she will be smiling at us.

In the Indian mythological context, the character of Draupadi and Sita in the Mahabharata and Ramayana are always represented as the typical submissive women and to be considered ideal and icons of femininity without questioning the cultural and patriarchal assumptions and presumptions. Nobody could ever try to travel into their minds as to what was happening in their silence. But these two mythologies are extensively used by the contemporary Indian women writers to challenge the dominant narratives and to question the artificially constructed identities of women.



Prathibha Ray's *Yagnaseni* (1994) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) are the two examples of how mythology can be used to challenge dominant narratives and reclaim women's histories. Both novels re-imagine the character of Draupadi from the Mahabharata, portraying her as a strong and resistant figure who challenges the patriarchal norms of her society. Through Draupadi's character, Ray and Divakaruni critique the traditional mythological narrative of the Mahabharata, highlighting the ways in which women's voices and experiences have been marginalized and silenced. *The Palace of Illusions* gives a vibrant voice to Draupadi—recasting a legendary saga through a woman's eyes. It invites reflection on female power, identity, and the illusions we live with.

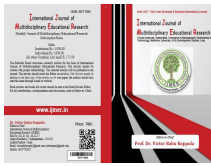
There are many movies made on the epic Mahabharatha, even it is re-written for the purpose of telecasting in the National television in the form of weekly serial. Not in a single narration we could peep into the inner psychological trauma of Draupadi as a wife to the five husbands. But in *Yagnaseni*, Prathibha Ray literally travelled with the feminine psyche of Draupadi in the form of an autobiography. Originally written in Odiya, the book later got translated into many languages including English. The popularity of this book drew the attention of Suman Pokhrel who rendered this novel into a theatrical play in Nepali.

Volga's *Liberation of Sita* (2016) is another example of how mythology can be used to challenge dominant narratives and reclaim women's autonomy. This book comprises five episodes in which we can find the conversations of Sita with other female characters in the Ramayana. Each story explores Sita's journey to emotional and spiritual freedom through her encounters with other women from the epic.

In "Reunion" Sita meets Soorpanakha whose nose and ears were cut by Laxmana just for expressing her love for Rama. She is portrayed as villainous and immoral in the Ramayana. But when Sita meets Soorpanakha, she is no longer vengeful but wise. She teaches Sita that freedom lies in letting go of expectations and waiting. Soorpanakha's empathy and strength help Sita begin her journey of emotional liberation. In "The Sand Pot" Sita meets Ahalya, who was once cursed to be a stone. Ahalya emphasizes that her true redemption came not from Rama, but from her own decision to live again. The 'sand pot' becomes a symbol of a woman's fragile identity shaped by others. In "The Voice of the Veena" Sita meets Renuka, who was once executed by her son for her husband's honor. Renuka uses music as a means of healing and self-expression. Through her, Sita learns about the power of creativity and reclaiming one's voice. In "The Shackled" Sita meets Urmila Lakshmana's wife, who reveals her loneliness and invisible sacrifice. She challenges the glorification of male duty and emphasizes that unrecognized endurance is also penance. Sita learns that virtue must be rooted in choice, not silence. In the final episode, "The Liberated", Sita, now transformed, refuses to return to Ayodhya. She raises her sons in peace and strength. This final story marks her complete emotional liberation — she no longer seeks Rama's validation and lives fully on her own terms.

Through Sita's character, Volga critiques the traditional mythological narrative of the Ramayana, highlighting the ways in which women's voices and experiences have been marginalized and silenced. Each story in "The Liberation of Sita" stands for each woman's assertion of the self that had been silenced in the myth and which had been accepted without questioning. The main themes, symbolic elements, and characters featured in each story from Volga's 'The Liberation of Sita' are shown below;

Story	Main Character that Sita Met	Themes	Symbol/Metaphor
The Reunion	Soorpanakha	Sisterhood, Letting Go, Emotional Freedom	Soorpanakha's scars and wisdom
The Sand Pot	Ahalya	Self-Redemption, Shame, Reclaiming Identity	Sand pot (fragility of identity shaped by others)



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The Voice of the Veena	Renuka	Healing Through Art, Finding One's Voice	Veena (self-expression, healing)
The Shackled	Urmila	Invisible Labor, Female Endurance, Autonomy	Sleep and separation (silent endurance)
The Liberated	—	Complete Liberation, Self-Reliance, Inner Peace	Refusal to return (assertion of independence)

In her another novel, *Yashodhara*, Volga re-imagines the story of Yashodhara, the wife of the Buddha. Yashodara was an underrepresented character in the history of Buddha and she was known only as a silent sufferer. Volga's novel portrays Yashodhara as a strong and independent figure who challenges the patriarchal norms of her society. *Yashodhara* is a compelling book that re-centers the narrative on Yashodhara's strength, intellect, and spiritual presence. Right from the moment she chooses Sidhartha as her husband, she equally involves in the spiritual enlightenment of Siddhartha as an inspiring and encouraging partner. The Yashodara we see through the lens of feminist thoughts in the novel is a quick-witted, compassionate and wants to pave a way for women to partake in spiritual learning as equals of men unlike the Yashodara that we see in the history as a passive and unenthusiastic individual.

In conclusion, the works of Margaret Atwood, Prathibha Ray, Helen Cixious, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Pratibha Ray and Volga, demonstrate the power of mythical consciousness in modern women's writing. By re-claiming and re-interpreting myths from a feminist perspective, these writers challenge dominant narratives, reclaim women's histories, and imagine alternative futures. Their works offer a powerful testament to the enduring power of mythology as a tool for social change and feminist empowerment.

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