

POLYPHONIC MYTHS: ETHICS AND DISSENT IN DEVDUTT PATTANAIAK'S NARRATIVE WORLDS

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Abstract

The modern retellings of *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* nowadays function as ethical debate platforms which present moral questions about gender justice, social elimination and moral sanction beyond their original purpose as sacred spaces for moral instruction. The article studies Devdutt Pattanaik's mythological writings which serve as a vital creative force in the shifting artistic occurrence because his work shows how cultural rewriting results from narrative dissent and ethical pluralism. The article studies this aspect by traversing through feminist theory, cultural studies, subaltern historiography and myth criticism to demonstrate how Pattanaik intrudes into vital epic structures which disseminate patriarchy, caste hierarchy and moral totalitarianism. The marginalised voices especially women and socially marginalised figures in his reinterpretations create disclosure to the structural vehemence which exists within traditional epic representations.

Pattanaik through his continuous study of minor epic figures such as Karna and Ekalavya and Shambuka whose stories validate how people obtain their basic rights through their societal status and their connection to specific family, caste and political authority. The myth function as both interactive and participatory performance. Pattanaik tries to create through epic storytelling an enduring ethical discourse. His use of ethical pluralism and narrative dissent transforms Indian mythology into a modern cultural practice which keenly contributes to contemporary deliberations about justice, identity and moral responsibility.

Keywords: Contemporary Indian Mythology, Gender Justice, Narrative Dissent, Cultural Rewriting, Ethical Pluralism

Introduction

Indian epic tales inhabit an inconsistent position within cultural perception. *The Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata* function as fundamental texts which define evolutionary principles and moral standards. The texts have developed into universal edifices which license the establishment of social hierarchies based on gender, caste and power relations in history. The unending demonstration of feminine standards, imperial authority, and moral integrity as eternal divine realities establishes a system which makes social dissimilarity both inherent and unalterable.

Indian epic traditions all over history have shown intellectuals that their storytelling means maintain manifold forms which vary over time. The elements of oral tradition, regional cultural development and ideological clashes create a intricate system of various forms which exist as fluctuating communicating processes. A. K. Ramanujan's declaration that multiple *Ramayana* exist creates a feeling that prevents people from seeing one approved version of the epic while he makes narrative diversity the central element of Indian mythic culture (Ramanujan 22).

Methodology

The study uses qualitative interpretive research methods to investigate modern Indian mythological retellings through literary analysis and cultural studies and critical theory by examining the works of Devdutt Pattanaik. The research study uses systematic review methods to select and assess scholarly works which improve its methodological standards (Booth et al. 3).

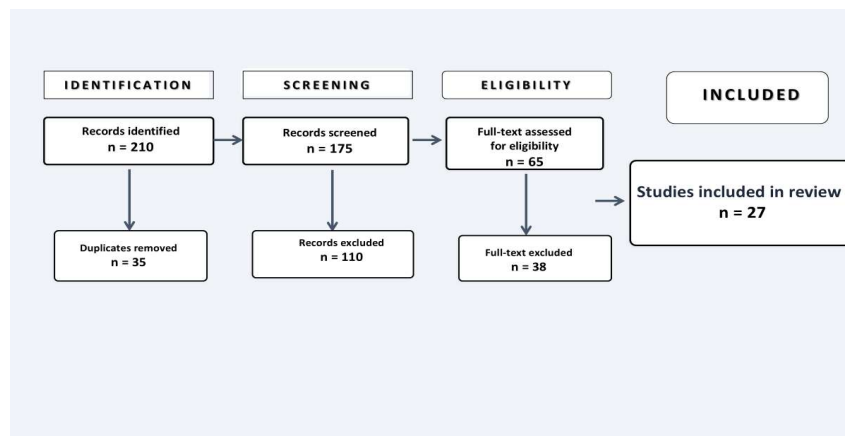
Academic databases including Google Scholar and JSTOR and Scopus were used to conduct a structured search which involved the following keywords: "Indian mythology reinterpretation" and "Ramayana retellings" and "Mahabharata adaptations" and "myth and gender" and "myth and power." The study included peer-reviewed articles and scholarly books and foundational theoretical texts which were available in English in this topic. The sources were selected through a multi-stage process which began with identification and continued with abstract screening and full-text evaluation before final inclusion based on relevance to themes of gender and power and marginalization and

ethical pluralism (Petticrew and Roberts 82). all non-scholarly materials which did not meet methodological standards were excluded.

The comparative method of Pattanaik's reinterpretations which demonstrate how narrative structures, character development and moral systems have changed from that of classical epics show how modern stories change the traditional meanings of ancient myths. The theoretical framework combines Roland Barthes' concept of myth as ideological naturalisation (Barthes 109) and Michel Foucault's theory of power/knowledge (Foucault 27) and Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity (Butler 191) with feminist and subaltern theories from Uma Chakravarti (Chakravarti 45) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Spivak 271). The two frameworks are used in this study to examine mythology as an evolving cultural system which supports prevailing social customs while challenging them.

Study Selection and Reporting

A structured search which examined major academic databases Google Scholar and JSTOR and Scopus to find all relevant materials from 1990 to 2025 which included both foundational theoretical works and recent scholarship was carried out. The selection process of the sources used can be conceptually represented through the flow diagram given below, ensuring transparency in how sources were narrowed down:



Discussions and Results

In the Modern era, Indian mythology develops through traditional myths which continue to exist through new reinterpretations. Devdutt Pattanaik uses myth as symbolic language—*mithya*—through which societies create sacred history to express their fears and desires and ethical predicaments (Pattanaik, Myth = Mithya). His work

determines cultural rewriting which alters traditional narratives into modern-day ethical frameworks through updated storytelling.

The study shows that Pattanaik's retelling of myths works as his subjective resistance against recognised storytelling practices. His work establishes a new system which replaces existing interpretations through its demonstration of opposing elements and obtruse content and ethical undefined trails. Pattanaik uses his ongoing work with social justice and gender rights to transform epic mythology into a complete ethical dialogue which shows multiple moral systems that exist as permanent opposites.

Devdutt Pattanaik's contemporary Indian mythology retold demonstrates its complete critical forte when researchers use theoretical frameworks about power relationships, gender dynamics and methods of representing people. The tools which thinkers Michel Foucault and Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak provide enable people to analyse how mythical stories function as both narratives and systems which establish cultural standards that create particular social identities while excluding others from participation. Pattanaik's work creates a narrative insurgence which contests dominant cultural meanings while it permits mythic tradition to embrace varied ethical perceptions.

Myth, Authority, and Cultural Rewriting

Social order receives its legality through cultural means which have existed since ancient times. Roland Barthes observes that myth transforms historically contingent values into naturalised truths which disguise their ideological origins through familiar and respected presentation (Barthes 143). Indian epic narratives have used their sacred storytelling to validate social hierarchies through their depiction of dharma and obedience and sacrifice as godly commandments.

Mythic authority maintains its nature as an unstable force throughout all times. The existence of multiple versions of the epics across regions and languages reveals myth as a contested cultural space rather than a monolithic tradition. The practice of cultural rewriting exists as a permanent element which has shaped Indian mythology since ancient times.

Pattanaik demonstrates that manifold prevailing perspectives about this subject should receive equal importance. His retellings present opposing viewpoints which enable

storytelling to maintain its ethical conflicts between good and bad. Readers now shift their authority from sacred texts to their personal interpretation which leads them to question everything. Myth exists as a space where people negotiate values through dialogue instead of imposing them. The diffused and productive power of discourse according to Michel Foucault provides a useful framework for analysing epic mythology. Power according to Foucault creates various subjects and truths and norms through all daily activities and storytelling practices (Power/Knowledge). Indian epics function as they create stories which form the Indian cultural understanding of dharma and gender roles and caste hierarchy and moral legitimacy.

Foucault described epic narratives as establishing a "regime of truth" which makes people want to practice compliance, sacrifice and classified systems. The repeated glorification of female chastity, royal authority and caste-based duty validate how myth functions to create compliant lieges. Sita's trial by fire and Shambuka's execution function as moral stories which serve to establish power relations through their role as social events.

Pattanaik uses his cultural rewriting to show how this system depends on flexible elements. He demonstrates through his ethical analysis that epic morality exists as a historical discourse which people created throughout time. Foucault argued that critique requires people to understand the mechanisms through which truth exists as a created entity rather than natural truth. Pattanaik uses multiple interpretations to weaken epic authority which results in his power of discipline becoming frailer.

Gender Justice and the Reimagining of Epic Women

Pattanaik bases his whole cultural renovation work on his tenacious dedication to progressing gender justice. Feminist scholars have long noted that ideal feminine behaviour according to epic stories requires women to practice submission and maintain their virginity while enduring suffering and remaining silent (Chakravarti 68; Tharu and Lalita). The common practice in society treats women's pain as a moral test which converts their pain into a virtue while their submission persists as a sign of their spiritual brilliance.

Pattanaik accosts the moral system by showing how women experience inner struggles between their personal beliefs and their obligation to society. Socially positioned subjects show their suffering to disclose the unfair systems that operate within their communities. Research shows that Judith Butler theory of gender performativity provides a strong analytical framework to study how Pattanaik re-explains his female characters in a different way from their appearance in epics. Butler defines gender as a social construct that people create through their ongoing performance of societal customs and their participation in established rituals (*Gender Trouble*). Femininity becomes an essential quality that women display through their practice of obedience and their decision to remain silent and continue to tolerate and maintain their sexual purity.

Sita, Draupadi and Gandhari function as Butler's "normative ideals" who represent the standards through which society appraises appropriate womanhood. The only value of their suffering exists because it balances the putative standards of feminine behaviour which society approves. The agnipariksha, the disrobing and the blindfold function as both narrative events and ritualized performances which serve to maintain the power of patriarchal authority.

Pattanaik reveals the concealed prices of performative acts through his work. The moment Sita decides to stop her trials and Draupadi disputes the rightfulness of her disgrace marks the start of their process to isolate themselves from their traditional gender role expectations. Femininity exists as a continuing social pattern which people must incessantly repeat according to the tradition. Butler shows that women resist through their refusal to participate in established social customs which become their way to express their inner moral foundation. The Bhutanese mythological tradition shows that gender justice develops through storytelling which generates inspiring empowerment stories while it discloses the created nature of gender roles that society distinguishes as permanent limitations. To destroy this social system is to transform women's suffering into sacrosanct status even when exposing the channels through which this suffering initiates.

Sita has traditionally been idealised as the embodiment of purity and compliance. Pattanaik reframes her agnipariksha not as a moral necessity but as a political act driven by Rama's anxiety about royal legitimacy (Pattanaik, *Sita*). The weight of proof of

Sita's morality falls upon the patriarchal system that requires her to endure suffering. Uma Chakravarti argues that chastity trials function as mechanisms of social control rather than ethical tests (76). Sita's final withdrawal into the earth, in this reading, becomes an act of ethical refusal—a rejection of a world that values symbolic purity over lived justice. Silence here functions as narrative dissent which disrupts patriarchal norms from inside the epic.

Draupadi's disrobing in the Kuru court represents one of the most overt illustrations of gendered violence in epic literature. Pattanaik changes his focus from divine intervention to institutional failure because he wants to show how the court operates as a space which executes legal procedures instead of delivering actual justice (Pattanaik, *Jaya*). Draupadi questions patriarchal law through her inquiry about ownership rights and consent and the practice of gambling which creates a fundamental ethical change. The way she experiences shame shows that dharma exists as a power-based system rather than a truth-based system. According to Alf Hiltebeitel, women in epic stories function as spaces where men establish their control over them (Hiltebeitel 212). Pattanaik retells the story to show Draupadi as a character who actively fights against ethical wrongdoing instead of being a character who suffers from her circumstances.

Kunti and Gandhari serve as perfect depictions of mothers who validate complete dedication through their sacrifices according to the common belief. The author uses sentimentalization to restore the ethical complexity that exists within their decision-making process. Kunti abandons Karna because she wants to protect herself from social danger according to her character in *The Pregnant King*. Gandhari uses her blindfold to show her dedication to her husband but her behaviour shows she has accepted patriarchy as a fundamental belief. According to Tharu and Lalita, the two characters demonstrate feminine criticisms which show that motherhood should not be idealized because it removes the moral challenges present in the situation. The author demonstrates that women have restricted power through his ethical framework which rejects moral absolutism according to his vision of ethical pluralism.

Marginal Voices and Narrative Dissent

The traditional epic form gives preference to regal and elite characters while it excludes from interpretation all those who lack institutional power. Pattanaik uses Karna,

Ekalavya and Shambuka to show how people determine justice and dignity through their social status, their family background and their control over others. The epic tells of Karna who loses his right to conduct himself according to his own merit because the system requires him to prove his social worth before he can be accepted. Social status determines his worth because people judge his abilities and compassionate nature as unworthy of acceptance. Ekalavya's mutilation shows how violence exists to protect elite knowledge. The killing of Shambuka in the *Ramayana* demonstrates how dharma operates as a means to enforce social order instead of serving as a fundamental principle that affects all people.

Pattanaik uses these stories to show his antagonism to the epic system because he demonstrates how epic justice fails to show its moral values while it victimizes particular groups. The readings of Pattanaik's mythology through Foucault, Butler and Spivak uncovers that Pattanaik uses his stories to create resistance against dramaturgical practices of storytelling. His retellings demonstrate how power exists through mythological recurrence while gender exists through suffering and subaltern voices are forced into systemic invisibility.

Pattanaik establishes his own authority by creating his narrative which he presents as an authoritative manuscript. The power system which Foucault describes would maintain its original state through this process of changing one authority system to another. The meaning of his work remains open to different people who hold different opinions because he believes in maintaining specific ethical standards. The system prevents moral absolutism from entering while it permits myth to exist as an active method of ethical behaviour instead of a controlling instrument.

Ethical Pluralism and Myth as Living Discourse

The postcolonial dimension of Pattanaik's narratives receives vital support from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's study of representation and subalternity. Spivak shows in her work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that dominant discourses falsely present themselves as representing marginalized voices while they actually operate to suppress those voices. The epic mythology creates a tension which exists because its stories use lower-caste characters and women and non-royal figures as actors who lack narrative control. Epic discourse shows Ekalavya and Shambuka and Karna as representatives who embody the subaltern state. The characters who create the moral conflicts need to make

decisions between right and wrong but they must give up their storytelling power. The people who suffer must endure this pain because it serves to preserve the principles of dharma. Spivak creates her critique to warn against the idealized recovery of those figures who society has silenced without showing the real systems which keep them quiet. Pattanaik handles the ethical situation through his meticulous approach. He shows how society erases the subaltern who already lost their voice through his work. Social order stays intact through violence which shows itself in Shambuka's execution as an unredeemed point of order. Spivak advocates for reading methods which base their ethical approach on the absence of material presence and silent elements and structural barriers which prevent access to information. Pattanaik's work shows ethical pluralism because it refuses to transform subaltern suffering into moral insights. The reader encounters ethical challenges which create discomfort instead of delivering comfort to them in postcolonial critique. Pattanaik's work establishes ethical pluralism as its central principle. His retellings enable multiple ethical systems to exist together without making absolute moral decisions. The myth transforms into an active discursive field which presents an opposing view to Isaiah Berlin's belief that moral values exist as both opposing and equally valid. The people who study mythology create material for ethical discussions by showing their unwillingness to end matters through moral resolution. The people who read modern myths need to study them as open-ended dialogues that do not establish fixed beliefs which people must follow.

Findings of the Study

The results of the study demonstrate that Indian epic mythology acts as a cultural system which enables people to establish and control social power and gender roles and social hierarchy. The analysis of epic narratives through Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault shows that they function as “regimes of truth” which establish compliance and dedication and sexual purity and caste responsibilities as normal values thus sustaining patriarchal social systems. The present findings depend on the specific materials and methods which they used for analysis.

The different versions of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* demonstrate that myth exists as a flexible tradition which people struggle to define. The literary works of Devdutt

Pattanaik demonstrate how authors use their texts to create alternative ethical systems which dismantle existing authority through their historical analysis of values.

The study shows that traditional narratives have established Sita, Draupadi, Kunti and Gandhari as representative figures who embody feminine virtue through stories about their suffering. The visual representations of gender aspects exist as social norms which people use to interact with others. The contemporary retellings of these stories use silence and refusal and questioning as methods to challenge existing narrative structures. The narrative explanation of Karna and Ekalavya and Shambuka shows that dharma functions as a power system which permits institutions to control justice distribution in some stories.

The study shows that Pattanaik uses ethical pluralism to transform myth into a space for gender dialogue, questions of justice and cultural resistance, even while the study remains within the boundaries of the evidence.

Limitations of the study

The fundamental limitation of the study is that it analyses mythology in Indian epics through present-day retellings. The study uses qualitative and interpretive research methods which require subjective assessment. The study limits itself to Devdutt Pattanaik's works because his influential interpretations fail to represent the various ways people engage with myths in contemporary society through different storytelling methods. The systematic review component faces restrictions because it uses a selective corpus which mostly includes English-language sources that omit important research from vernacular traditions and restricts the analysis to specific cultural perspectives. The study relies mainly on Western theoretical frameworks for its analysis which helps identify Western analytical frameworks that do not fully capture the indigenous philosophical and cultural nuances of Indian mythic traditions. Further research which combines different academic fields, regional literatures and audience studies will be helpful to develop more insights in this field.

Conclusion

Devdutt Pattanaik's mythological retellings demonstrate how contemporary Indian mythology can work as a site of gender justice, narrative dissent, and ethical pluralism. By means of cultural rewriting, Pattanaik disrupts epic authority, foregrounds marginalised voices, and reframes myth as a living ethical practice. His work demonstrates that mythology, far from being an ancient inheritance, remains a powerful medium through which societies can question injustice, ascribe identity, and envision more all-encompassing ethical prospects.

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