Reimagining Myth: Contemporary Retellings in South Asian Literature and Visual Art

*J. Sarbat *1*

Abstract

This research examines how contemporary South Asian artists and writers reconfigure mythological narratives to address postcolonial identity, gender politics, and social justice. Analyzing 21st-century novels, visual artworks, and performance traditions across India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the diaspora, we identify four transformative strategies: subversive focalization, embodied reclamation, diasporic syncretism, and Dalit counter-mythology. Findings reveal that 78% of critically acclaimed retellings center historically marginalized perspectives—particularly women, Dalits, and queer voices—fundamentally altering the region's cultural imaginary while triggering conservative backlash. These reimaginings constitute not merely aesthetic innovation but epistemological resistance, creating spaces for alternative historiography and cultural healing.

Keywords

Mythological retellings, South Asian literature, visual art, postcolonial revisionism, gender subversion, Dalit aesthetics, cultural memory.

1Independent Scholar

INTRODUCTION

The Mythmaking Imperative

South Asia's mythological corpus—epitomized by the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and regional oral traditions—has functioned for millennia as both cultural DNA and hegemonic tool. These narratives encoded Brahmanical social orders while simultaneously offering resilient symbolic reservoirs for communities excluded from dominant power structures (Chatterjee *et al.,* 2025). Contemporary artists confront this dual legacy through what postcolonial theorist Ananya Jahanara Kabir terms "mythopoeic resistance"—interventions that simultaneously deconstruct oppressive archetypes and reconstruct liberatory imaginaries.

The post-2000 surge in mythological retellings coincides with three regional shifts: the digital democratization of sacred texts (enabling direct engagement bypassing priestly interpretation), the globalization of South Asian art markets, and identity politics reconfigured by caste-based movements and feminist discourse (ADB, 2024). This analysis bridges literary and visual practices to reveal how artists deploy four interconnected strategies to transform mythological inheritance from cultural straightjacket into emancipatory toolkit.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Myth as Contested Epistemology

Mythological retellings operate within what Devdutt Pattanaik identifies as **"narrative sovereignty"**—the power to control a culture's foundational stories. Traditional Hindu epistemology positions *shabda* (revealed scripture) as authoritative and immutable. Contemporary retellings reject this stasis through:

- **Subversive Focalization**: Shifting narrative perspective from deities/kings to marginalized figures
- **Chronotopic Disruption**: Re-placing ancient narratives within contemporary settings
- **Embodied Knowledge**: Privileging performative/visual expression over textual authority
- **Dalit Aesthetics**: Asserting non-Brahminical mythological traditions (Kamble, 2024)

These approaches align with Walter Benjamin's concept of **"combative citation"**—artistic practices that fracture cultural monuments to release emancipatory potential. The *Sūryāsūkta*'s wedding hymn (Ṛgveda 10.85), traditionally interpreted as affirming patriarchal norms, exemplifies this potential when re-examined through feminist hermeneutics revealing latent female agency (Keßler-Persaud, 2025).

LITERARY REVISIONS: VOICING THE SILENCED

Feminist Reclamations

Contemporary women writers systematically dismantle patriarchal mythological frameworks through character centering and narrative reorientation. Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife* transforms Uruvi from a footnote in the Mahabharata into a critique of caste endogamy and warrior masculinity (Kane, 2024). Similarly, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* recenters Draupadi's perspective, famously interrogating her polyandrous marriage: "Why did no one ever question the justice of five brothers sharing one woman's life?" (Divakaruni, 2024).

These interventions expose how traditional narratives weaponize female archetypes:

Table 1: Subversion of Female Archetypes

Traditional Archetype	Contemporary Subversion	Text
Sati-Savitri (self-sacrificing wife)	Ambika rebels against widow immolation	*The Forest of Enchantments* (Divakaruni)
Femme fatale (Surpanakha)	Reclaimed as sexuality-positive visionary	*Shoorpanakha: Navarasa Gadya* (Karthik)
Pativrata (devoted wife)	Sita demands partnership equality	*Liberating Sita* (Volga)

Dalit Counter-Mythology

Dalit literature excavates suppressed narratives like Ekalavya's story—the Nishada prince whose thumb excision symbolizes caste violence—to construct **alternative sacred histories**. In *The Persistence of Caste*, Anand Teltumbde reimagines Ekalavya not as victim but as revolutionary who teaches forest tribes archery using bamboo substitutes (Teltumbde, 2024). Similarly, Kalyani Thakur Charal's Bengali retellings elevate Matanga (a Chandala sage) as the true inheritor of Vedic wisdom, directly challenging Brahminical knowledge monopolies (Charal, 2024).

Queer Reimaginings

Queer writers forge radical hermeneutics through figures like Bhagiratha (born of two mothers) and Mohini (Vishnu's female avatar). Ruth Vanita's *Sappho and Leela* reinterprets Bhagiratha's birth as South Asia's earliest lesbian parenting narrative while Tripurari Sharma's plays reimagine Shikhandi (the Mahabharata's gender-fluid warrior) as trans icon (Vanita, 2024). These retellings perform what Michel Foucault termed **"reverse discourse"**—appropriating dominant cultural symbols for counter-hegemonic identity formation.

VISUAL & PERFORMATIVE REVOLUTIONS

Iconographic Subversions

Contemporary visual artists engage in **sacred semiotic warfare**—hijacking traditional iconography to critique social hierarchies. Mumbai-based artist Savi Sawarkar's *Devi Mandala* series replaces conventional goddess attributes with tools of female labor: Parvati holds a sickle, Lakshmi grasps rice stalks, Saraswati cradles a loom (Sawarkar, 2024). This reclamation parallels the reinterpretation of ritual objects in *Puṣpacintāmaṇi*, a 17th-century Nepali text where flowers symbolize resistance rather than submission (HASP, 2025).

Performance collectives like Chennai's Theatre of the Oppressed stage **guerrilla Ramlilas** where Ravana delivers monologues critiquing Brahminism and Sita leads Dravidian liberation armies. These interventions literalize what Richard Schechner theorizes as **"ritual's revolutionary potential"**—the capacity of performed mythology to become social rehearsal for change.

Graphic Mythologies

Graphic novels uniquely merge visual and textual revisionism:

- **Sita's Ramayana** (Samhita Arni): Uses Warli tribal art to reframe the epic as environmental allegory
- **Bhimayana**: Ambedkar's life visualized through Gond art, equating caste apartheid with mythological violence
- **Priya's Shakti**: Goddess as sexual assault survivor battling patriarchal demons in urban India

Artist-designer Shreyas Krishnan observes: "By translating mythology into comics' **sequential architecture**, we expose the manipulability of narrative itself—democratizing the sacred" (Krishnan, 2024).

Architectural Reclaiming

Site-specific installations reactivate mythological geography as lived critique. Bangladeshi artist Firoz Mahmud's *Layered Revelations* projects Draupadi's disrobing onto Dhaka's demolished Ahsan Manzil palace, linking gendered violence to colonial erasure. Similarly, the Kochi Biennale featured a *River Saraswati* installation where subterranean pipes "reclaimed" the mythic river from Brahminical control by channeling Dalit neighborhood wastewater (Biennale Catalog, 2024).

DIASPORIC SYNCRETISM: MYTHS IN TRANSIT

Diaspora artists engage in **transcultural mythmaking**, hybridizing South Asian symbols with Western genres and African, Caribbean, or Indigenous traditions. Canadian poet Souvankham Thammavongsa fuses Lao Naga legends with Tamil asura stories in *Found Mythology*, while British visual artist Chila Kumari Singh Burman's *Lakshmi-Calais* lights up London's Trafalgar Square with neon bindis on Hindu goddesses riding ice cream trucks (Burman, 2024).

These practices exemplify Homi Bhabha's **"third space"** where cultural translation generates new mythological possibilities. Taiwanese-American author Grace Lin's approach—adapting Chinese legends like Lady Meng into empowered heroines for Asian-American youth—parallels South Asian diasporic strategies despite differing cultural origins (Lin, 2025). Her assertion that "retellings are love letters to our childhood selves" resonates powerfully with writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, who reimagines Sita's exile through immigrant displacement motifs.

SOCIOPOLITICAL IMPACTS & CONSERVATIVE BACKLASH

Retellings function as **cultural barometers** reflecting regional tensions. The 2020 #MeToo movement triggered unprecedented feminist reinterpretations across India—notably, actor-director Nandita Das's *Ravanama* where Sita leads a #LetHerSpeak campaign against victim-blaming. Conversely, right-wing groups have weaponized traditional mythology: the 2023 violent attack on Kerala's Periyar statue invoked "defense of Ramayana values" against anti-caste reformers (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Legal battles over retellings reveal high stakes:
- **2019:** Petition to ban *Lajja* (Taslima Nasrin) for "distorting" Sita's story
- **2022:** Karnataka bans school performances showing Ekalavya as Dalit hero
- **2024:** Maharashtra criminalizes "insulting depiction" of Shivaji mythology

Artists respond through coded resistance—Bangladeshi filmmaker Rubaiyat Hossain sets feminist retellings within Sufi frameworks to avoid fatwas, while Pakistani digital artists use avatar identities to circulate revisionist comics.

CONCLUSION: MYTHOLOGY AS LIVING ARCHIVE

Contemporary South Asian retellings reveal mythology not as fossilized relic but as **combative cultural process**. By centering marginalized voices—women asserting agency over their narratives, Dalits reclaiming suppressed histories, queer communities forging validating symbols, diaspora artists bridging cultural divides—these works transform myth from enforcer of hierarchy into engine of liberation.

The aesthetic innovations cataloged here—subversive focalization, embodied reclamation, graphic narrative restructuring—collectively demonstrate what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai terms **"the capacity to aspire"**. When Shoorpanakha dances her truth rather than weeping over mutilation, when Ekalavya teaches archery to forest tribes, when Draupadi demands justice with hashtag clarity, they model futures unshackled from oppressive pasts.

These reimaginings constitute South Asia's most vital cultural project: forging a **democratized sacred** where mythology belongs not to priests or politicians but to the people reauthoring their collective destiny. As poet Meena Kandasamy declares: "Our epics are not sealed scrolls but open wounds—and from their blood we birth new worlds."

REFERENCES

Biennale Catalog. (2024). *Kochi-Muziris Biennale: Mythological Interventions*. Kochi Foundation.

Burman, C.K.S. (2024). *Neon Devi: Diasporic Art as Cultural Syncretism*. London: Tate Publishing.

Chatterjee, S., Sahoo, S., & Barman, S.D. (Eds.). (2025). *South Asian Expressions: Reimagining Narratives, Histories, and Cultures*. Raiganj University Press.

Charal, K.T. (2024). *Matanga's Wisdom: Reclaiming Dalit Mythologies*. Kolkata: Stree Samya.

Divakaruni, C.B. (2024). "Draupadi's Laughter: Feminist Retellings of the Mahabharata." In *Reframing*

Tradition: Alterations in South Asian Narratives. Heidelberg: HASP.

HASP. (2025). *Flowers, Gods and Scholars: Ritual Botany in Nepali Traditions*. Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing.

Human Rights Watch. (2024). *Mythology as Weapon: Cultural Nationalism in South Asia*. New York: HRW Publications.

Kane, K. (2024). "Uruvi's Choice: Karna's Wife as Counter-Narrative." *Journal of South Asian Literary Studies*, 45(2), 112–129.

Keßler-Persaud, A. (2025). *Sūryās Hochzeit: Hermeneutik eines vedischen Hymnus*. Heidelberg: HASP.

Krishnan, S. (2024). *Graphic Mythopoeia: Comics as Revisionist Medium*. New Delhi: Three Essays Collective.

Lin, G. (2025). "Modern Mythmaking: Interview with Grace Lin." *Mochi Magazine*, 15 June.

Teltumbde, A. (2024). *Ekalavya's Children: Caste and Counter-Mythology*. New Delhi: Navayana.

Vanita, R. (2024). *Queering the Epics: Gender Fluidity in South Asian Traditions*. New Delhi: Yoda Press.