

Unveiling Feminine Narratives: Reinterpreting Mythology and Reshaping Ideologies in Irawati Karve's Postmodern Retelling of Hindu Mythology

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Abstract.

The discourse surrounding mythology has been categorized as male-centered, highlighting a prevalent trend where mythological narratives often celebrate and glorify masculine strength. In contrast, women are frequently depicted as passive figures, relegated to roles as victims or silent observers, with little acknowledgment of feminine power or inherent female qualities. This unfavorable representation of women in literature has raised concerns among feminist writers. Consequently, they undertake the task of reinterpreting patriarchal myths, seeking to reshape the literary canon and present women from a distinctly female perspective. This paper delves into the reimagining of Hindu mythology by the postmodern writer Irawati Karve, considering it a crucial space for the construction of ideological subjects. Modern retellings challenge the ideological boundaries of the phallogocentric male canon, creating an alternative feminine discourse by situating women within an imagined female community and historical context. The analysis sheds light on how patriarchy utilizes mythical narratives to legitimize its dominion over women, further suggesting that these narratives contribute to the conflation of diverse female identities. The primary objective of this study is to explore how feminist authors employ mythology to gain insights into the power and resilience of the varied array of mortal and immortal female characters found in folktales, legends, and mythology, as portrayed through their reinterpretations.

Keywords: Feminism; Myth; Patriarchy; Retelling.

1. Introduction

The traditional portrayal of women in Indian epics has undergone a revision, moving away from the stereotypical image of obedient and passive women towards a more authentic representation of women as resilient, self-determined individuals who actively confront the patriarchal constraints of their time. This shift is primarily driven by the growing influence of female writers who are redefining the narratives of women in Indian literature. Myths, shaped by the stories we tell, have a profound impact on our understanding of ourselves. The inspiring stories of courageous women who challenged societal limitations and pursued their passions, despite facing prejudice and the denial of fundamental rights, have empowered countless women to embrace their voices and pursue their dreams through writing.

Myths are stories deeply rooted in tradition, often providing explanations for the origins of cultures. They serve as a means of understanding events and phenomena that ancient civilizations could not explain through scientific or rational means, relying on shared experiences and collective knowledge. In the realm of myths, supernatural entities or forces often play a significant role in shaping societal norms and addressing social issues. The continued belief in myths within communities is often strengthened by the existence of corresponding rituals that reinforce these narratives. Myths encompass a blend of metaphysical, practical, and moral aspects, offering insights into potential worlds and influencing human understanding. They prompt readers or observers to comprehend, cultivate, and navigate a particular system of signs and meanings. M. H. Abrams states: “Myth is one story in mythology- a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives” (Abrams 170).

Adriana Cavarero, Judith Butler, Mara Zambrano, Luce Irigaray, and Tina Chanter have each offered thorough interpretations of Antigone as a pivotal figure in the realm of feminist

ethical-political imagination. Irigaray's writings offer a critical examination of the representational

system embedded within Greek mythology and catastrophes, particularly in relation to the suppression of femininity. By engaging with the works of prominent thinkers within the

Occidental tradition, Irigaray sheds light on the underlying causes of Occidental culture's decline, which she identifies as the systematic marginalization of the feminine. "Women have no chivalrous legends in which their ventures are reflected, they still visualize through the visions of males. Deities made by males are the divinities they worship" (Wallace and Hirsch, 13). The Mahabharata, one of India's most significant epics, is traditionally attributed to Vyasa, a sage believed to have witnessed firsthand many of the events chronicled in the narrative. In a similar vein, the Ramayana, another cornerstone of Hindu literature, is credited to Valmiki, a poet-sage who drew inspiration for the epic from the tale of *Rama*, narrated by the divine Narada. "Both were men. Replace these ideal male-created mythical models with 'replacement models' as a possible answer to this problem" (Nakhare Kriti 168). Our Indian writers often overlook the portrayal of women in mythology and their own capabilities as writers with unique perspectives. Hindu mythology, as depicted in epics like the "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata," has traditionally been presented as divine instructions for men on leading fulfilling lives, lacking a feminist perspective. However, a significant shift occurred with the advent of Dr. Irawati Karve in the early 1900s onto the Indian literary stage. In the nascent period of Indian sociology, Karve emerged as a formidable figure despite the challenges posed by the male-dominated landscape. Her expertise in the field played a crucial role in establishing her name and breaking barriers.

In her groundbreaking work, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, Irawati Karve sheds the mythical veil surrounding the Mahabharata's legendary figures, unveiling their profound humanity. She embarks on a journey of exploration, unraveling the driving forces behind their actions and exposing the shades of gray that define their personalities. Unlike traditional portrayals that paint these characters in stark black and white, Karve's nuanced approach reveals them as multifaceted individuals, grappling with inner struggles and facing moral dilemmas, mirroring the experiences of ordinary mortals. Through her insightful analysis,

Karve bridges the gap between myth and reality, breathing life into the epic's characters and allowing readers to connect with them on a deeply personal level.

2. Method

The researcher has conducted a thorough examination of the text, carefully scrutinizing individual words, phrases, and literary devices to uncover the underlying meanings, symbols, and intentions embedded within the text. This meticulous approach, known as textual analysis,

allows for a deeper comprehension regarding the text's intricacies and nuances. Additionally, the researcher has considered relevant secondary sources to accommodate a broader context for the text. By combining textual analysis with contextual information, the researcher aims to present a compact analysis of the narrative's subtleties, cultural references, and authorial choices. This holistic approach guarantees the researcher's interpretations are well-grounded and insightful.

3. Results and Discussion

Beyond Conventional Portrayals: Exploring Character Dynamics in *Yuganta*

The retelling of mythology represents a dynamic and transformative endeavor, breathing new life into ancient narratives and reinterpreting timeless tales. Authors engaging in this creative process embark on a journey to reshape traditional myths, offering fresh perspectives on familiar characters and storylines. Through these retellings, the rich tapestry of mythology is woven into contemporary contexts, allowing for the exploration of universal themes that resonate across cultures and generations. These narratives not only preserve the essence of ancient myths but also provide a platform for reflection on the enduring relevance and adaptability of mythological themes in the ever-evolving landscape of human storytelling. Adrienne Rich on her essay, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision* remarks: "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction— is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (18). Re-visioning, the act of retrospectively analyzing and engaging with old texts through a fresh critical lens, extends its significance beyond a mere chapter in cultural history. It

emerges as an essential act of survival for us. Re-envisioning old texts is not about discarding or undermining their traditional interpretations; it's about expanding our understanding, enriching our perspectives, and fostering a more inclusive and dynamic cultural discourse. It's about recognizing that old texts are not static objects but dynamic reflections of the societies that produced them, and that their meanings evolve as we evolve. As we re-engage with these texts, we open ourselves to new possibilities, challenging our assumptions and expanding our horizons. We engage in a dialogue with the past, not as passive recipients of tradition, but as active participants in its ongoing interpretation.

Re-visioning old texts is a form of cultural translation, enabling us to bridge the gap between the past and the present, between the familiar and the unfamiliar. It's about reclaiming

the power of storytelling to illuminate our collective experiences and guide us towards a more just and equitable future. By re-envisioning old texts, we not only gain a deeper understanding of our history but also equip ourselves with the tools to navigate the challenges of the present and shape a more just and equitable future. In her work, *Yuganta*, Karve employs a critical lens to scrutinize multiple iterations of the *Mahabharata*, delving into the intricacies of character development and the underlying motives that propel the story. Informed by her anthropological background, Karve approaches the epic as a historical account of actual individuals and events, acknowledging the presence of mythical elements and subsequent alterations that may have distorted the original narrative.

Renowned for her dystopian novel *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, Iravati Karve is not only a dedicated feminist but also a remarkable writer. Devoted followers of Karve recognize her exploration of mythos, evident in many of her works. She confronts entrenched chauvinism by challenging the enduring portrayal of women as perpetually submissive. Through her writings on iconic figures from ancient mythology such as Draupadi, Kunti, and Gandhari, Karve dismantles prevailing stereotypes. Her critical lens extends beyond female personalities, as she scrutinizes celebrated figures like *Bhisma*, *Pitamah*, *Karna*, *Yudhistir*, and, above all, *Vasudev Krishna*, with a nuanced and incisive perspective. Commencing her analysis with *Bhishma*, the revered great-grandfather of the Kuru lineage and its final biological member, Iravati Karve questions the necessity of his vow of celibacy, particularly

in the absence of other men in the household. She scrutinizes the purpose behind his legendary commitment and delves into the repercussions endured by numerous women due to *Bhishma*. These repercussions include being subjected to *Niyoga*, forced marriages to family men, and instances where he remained passive while they faced indignities. Karve also raises doubts about *Bhishma*'s portrayal as a valiant warrior, supporting her skepticism with illustrative examples. The subsequent chapters focus on the injustices faced by the two prominent mothers, *Gandhari* and *Kunti*, highlighting their resilience as *Kshatriya* women and their roles in binding the *Kuru* fraternity together.

Karve delves into the complex persona of *Karna*, challenging the popular portrayal of him as a tragic hero. She unveils a more nuanced depiction of *Karna*, revealing his flaws, such as his deep-seated resentment and impulsive nature, which overshadow his occasional moments of strength and nobility. Similarly, Karve demystifies *Krishna*, stripping him of his divine aura and presenting him as Arjuna's close companion and a supporter of the *Pandavas*. As the narrative delves into the lives of these individuals and weaves their stories together, the central storyline is conveyed with clarity. Evaluating the formidable impact of three powerful personalities—*Gandhari*, *Kunti*, and *Draupadi*—the author explores their influence and effects. *Kunti* and *Gandhari*, serving as maternal figures to the warring Pandava and Kaurava clans, emerge as resilient matriarchs. Despite facing intrigues and complexities, these two mothers remarkably held their clans together, navigating distinct life paths with unwavering strength.

Kunti, renowned as the matriarch of the legendary five brothers, has faced adversity since her early years, compelling her to confront and combat challenges or face dire consequences. Her unwavering loyalty to the men in her life is evident in enduring hardships, whether living with an ailing spouse or raising offspring cursed to face perpetual upheaval and forced asceticism. The *Pandavas*, under *Kunti*'s guidance, navigated a lifetime marked by societal isolation, self-imposed exile, and relentless battles. Among them, *Draupadi* stands out as the most prominent female figure. Her courageous interrogation of Yudhishtir in the face of impending humiliation in the *Kuru* court showcased her resilience. Both *Draupadi* and *Kunti* served as cohesive forces, uniting the brothers and propelling them toward their collective goal. *Kunti*'s deep empathy for *Draupadi*'s insult by *Duryodhan* and *Duhshasan* prompted her

to invite her sons to seek justice and retribution, even if it meant engaging in war with close family and friends.

The Significance of Myth Retelling

Myths, the ancient tales of gods, heroes, and supernatural events, have captivated human imagination for millennia. These stories, deeply embedded in various cultures, serve as repositories of collective wisdom, offering insights into our origins, values, and aspirations. However, the retelling of myths is not merely an act of preservation; it is a dynamic process of reinterpretation and adaptation that reflects the evolving social, cultural, and political landscapes. The retelling of myths serves several crucial purposes:

Firstly, **Reaffirmation of Cultural Identity:** Myths provide a sense of shared heritage and identity, connecting individuals to their cultural roots. Retelling myths allows communities to reaffirm their values, beliefs, and traditions, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity.

Secondly, **Exploration of Universal Themes:** Myths often explore universal themes of human nature, such as love, loss, good versus evil, and the quest for meaning. Retelling myths allows these themes to be revisited and reinterpreted in light of contemporary concerns, providing a framework for understanding and addressing modern-day challenges.

Thirdly, **Social Commentary and Critique:** Myths can be reinterpreted to serve as powerful tools for social commentary and critique. By examining the stories of the past, we can gain a deeper understanding of current social issues and power structures, enabling us to challenge injustices and advocate for social change.

Fourthly, **Artistic Expression and Innovation:** Myths have long served as a source of inspiration for artists and writers, providing rich narrative and symbolic content. Retelling myths allows for artistic expression and innovation, leading to the creation of new literary works, artistic representations, and musical compositions.

Fifthly, **Cultural Exchange and Dialogue:** The retelling of myths across cultures fosters cross-cultural understanding and dialogue. By sharing and interpreting myths from different traditions, we can gain insights into diverse worldviews and appreciate the common threads that bind humanity together.

The Mahabharata is a narration of historical events, but to elevate the narrative and imbue it with majesty, the story is presented as if the events are unfolding in an era that transcends time and is constantly present. Literary works, similar to other narratives, often give preference to certain voices, ideas, and perspectives. With the exception of overtly revolutionary works, the favored voices typically reflect the prevailing social, economic, and cultural hierarchy of the society that produced the work. “Karve is certain that the events described in the Mahabharata occurred – that they are historical events; she is certain that most of the characters in the epic are real people – that they are not superhumans – that they are frail; that they have emotions; that they have strengths and weaknesses. What they did and what occurred happened for a purpose” (Nath 2). Drawing upon the Mahabharata, Karve delves into the intricacies of civilization and societal structures that existed potentially millennia ago in northern India. She subsequently establishes parallels between the civilization of northern India and Greek society during that era. Numerous other authors have also endeavored to depict this epic in their own unique styles and approaches. “What number of Mahabharatas have we heard, seen, or read? According to A K Ramanujan, no Hindu ever peruses the Mahabharata for the first time” (Lal 3). From a young age, the epic of the Kuru clan is introduced to children through various mediums, including comic books, films, and television adaptations. The written form of the epic, often presented in the mother tongue, enters their mindscape later in life. Sanskrit, the original language of the *Mahabharata*, is encountered less frequently. *The Mahabharata's* enduring popularity offers a valuable perspective on how India has been perceived and represented throughout history. Irawati Karve, in her insightful interpretation titled *Yuganta*, delves into the epic's origins, tracing its roots to *Jaya*, a victorious ballad that served as the foundation for this grand narrative.

4. Conclusion

From its origin, the *Mahabharata* has been interpreted in various ways, with some going as far as crafting entirely new retellings of its tale. Certain individuals have opted to narrate the story from the perspective of a specific character from the *Mahabharata*. Throughout history,

the *Mahabharata* has captivated the literary imagination of India, influencing the Indian approach to contemplating and interpreting texts through a myriad of classical and folk renditions in diverse genres. In her work, Irawati Karve, an anthropologist, sheds light on the humanity of the *Mahabharata*'s legendary figures, revealing their imperfections and virtues in a way that makes them seem real and relatable. Her exploration of these characters underscores the profound impact of the feminist movement, which has empowered women to challenge traditional narratives and assert their voices. As these myths are reinterpreted, it is crucial to broaden the scope of storytelling, explore diverse perspectives, and initiate new dialogues. The retelling of myths is an ongoing process that plays a vital role in shaping our understanding of the past, present, and future. By revisiting these ancient tales, we can reaffirm our cultural identities, explore timeless themes, engage in social critique, foster artistic expression, and promote cross-cultural dialogue. Through the retelling of myths, we can continue to learn, grow, and connect as a global community.

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