

CONTEMPORARY RETELLINGS OF RAMAYANA: REVIVAL OF THE EPIC FOR MODERN READERS

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Abstract

The Ramayana, an ancient Indian epic of immense significance, has been recounted in numerous versions and expressions, maybe in the book form by contemporary authors, stage performances by local artists such as Ramlila in the northern part of India and as masked dance drama known as Kathakali in Kerala, television series by various production houses and many more. The enormous cultural, religious, moral and artistic effects of this story cross borders, making it one of the most retold stories around the globe. This paper looks into the sense of understanding and point of view of different authors who have dived deep into this ancient epic from their own perspective. Each retelling of this ancient epic brings forth unique insights, values, and cultural nuances, reflecting the diversity of human experiences and interpretations. In examining these diverse retellings, one can uncover how different authors and artists engage with the themes and characters of the Ramayana, offering their own interpretations and insights. Some may focus on the moral dilemmas faced by the characters, while others may explore the socio-political context of the narrative.

Keywords

Ancient Ramayana, Epic, Contemporary Authors, Human Experiences, Insights

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Received: 02.02.2025

Approved: 15.03.2025

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Article No.3

RJPSS Oct.-Mar. 2025,

Vol. L No. 1,

pp. 014-024

Similarity Check - 07%

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[https://doi.org/10.31995/
rjpss.2025.v50i01.003](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2025.v50i01.003)

Introduction

The Indian literary market has consistently seen an exceptional response to retellings of mythical stories, particularly those from the Ramayana, which are being reimagined from various perspectives. These narratives have not only cultivated a dedicated readership but also serve as a legacy of Indian culture, preserved through each retelling. Authors in Indian fantasy fiction are increasingly drawing upon epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata as foundational storylines, prioritizing them over popular Western fantasies. Writers such as Devdutt Pattanaik, Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi, Ashok Banker, and others have devoted themselves to unraveling the endless puzzles and enigmas of these mythical tales. They reinterpret and reshape these epics in their works, as seen in Amish Tripathi's Meluha trilogy featuring human characters Shiva and Sati, and Devdutt Pattanaik's portrayals of Sita and Jaya.

The Mythological Ramayana

The huge impact of the Ramayana in South and Southeast Asia for over 2,500 years is notable, with over 300 known adaptations in literature. This renowned Hindu epic narrates the life and exploits of Rama, a hero revered as a deity in India. Traditionally attributed to the sage Valmiki and likely composed in the 200s B.C., the Ramayana is believed to include sacred content from the Vedas, a collection of ancient Hindu religious scriptures. Key characters such as Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Bharata, Hanuman, Shatrughna, and Ravana hold significant cultural importance in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asian nations, including Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The epic exists in numerous versions across Indian languages, as well as in Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain adaptations, and in the literature of Southeast Asian countries.

The Ramayana is a vast narrative of profound religious and spiritual significance, frequently adapted throughout Indian history. Valmiki's Sanskrit original has been transformed by various authors, including Kamban's Ramayana and the Ramakien in Thailand. Tulsidas' Ramacharitmanas is a notable adaptation that continues to encourage contemporary readers and authors. The central themes of the original Ramayana resonate across regional cultures and artistic forms, transcending linguistic boundaries.

In many analyses of the Ramayana, Sita is often depicted as the ideal Indian woman. Valmiki's portrayal of Sita shows her as unassertive, compliant, docile, self-sacrificing, and intensely loyal to her husband. She unhesitatingly accompanies Rama into exile and steadfastly supports him despite numerous challenges. These attributes have been lauded, shaping patriarchal perceptions of women's morality and casting Sita as an exemplary role model deserving of admiration.

In the context of Indian mythology and its connection to literature, myths serve as powerful tools for preserving history and culture in a country with a less solid historical tradition compared to the Western world (Jhanjhnodia, 2015). Writers leverage the richness of Indian mythology to highlight contemporary times' magnificence. For instance, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) raises anti-colonial awareness through its characters. Although the story is told from the perspective of an elderly rural woman, it can be interpreted as a fabled tale of Ram's triumph over Ravana, emphasizing the enduring faith in the triumph of good over evil (Jhanjhnodia, 2015). Every Indian village has a rich 'Sthala-Purana' or mythical heritage (*Kanthapura*, 5), linking each story to ancient myths.

Many stories from ancient legends involve deified humans. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *"Palace of Illusions"* (2008) explores Draupadi's friendship with Krishna, a relationship often overlooked in mainstream cultural representations. Divakaruni portrays Draupadi as a woman rather than a princess bound to five husbands (Sawai, 2015).

Amish Tripathi's "Sita: Warrior of Mithila"

Indian mythology profoundly illustrates the tradition, culture, and societal ethos of India's ancient lineage. The *Ramayana*, a seminal Indian epic, recounts the tale of Rama, an avatar of Vishnu. Diverse interpretations across myriad versions of the *Ramayana* exalt Rama as the people's savior, depicting Sita as the quintessential meek and obedient wife, dutifully following her husband. Renowned for humanizing deities, Amish Tripathi adopts a similar approach in his second novel, *"Sita: Warrior of Mithila"*, where he recounts Sita's story. Like his *"Shiva Trilogy"*, Amish critiques the prevailing patriarchal norms, portraying Sita as a formidable, intelligent warrior capable of governance, thus reflecting a modern perspective. Sita, with her exceptional attributes, emerges as the protector of India.

The narrative commences with Janak and his wife, rulers of Mithila, discovering an abandoned infant girl in a field. They adopt the child and name her Sita. Mother Sunaina becomes her constant guide and support. At fourteen, Sita is sent to Rishi Shvetaketu's ashram, where she hones her martial skills and befriends Radhika, through whom she connects with Hanuman. Maharishi Vishwamitra, leader of the Malayaputra tribe, visits the ashram, recognizing Sita's potential and selecting her as the next Vishnu to rule the kingdom, instructing her to maintain secrecy. Sita also forms a friendship with Jatayu. Upon returning to Mithila due to her mother's illness, she assumes the role of Mithila's prime minister after her mother's death, continuing her preparation to become Vishnu.

Learning that Rishi Vashishta has chosen Ram, prince of Ayodhya, as the next Vishnu, Sita devises a plan to marry Ram through *Swayamvar*. Ravan's presence

at the event annoys Sita, but with Vishwamitra's help, Ram triumphs. Following their marriage, Ravan's assault on Mithila results in his army's defeat and his escape. Ram defies Lord Rudra's decree and exiles himself for fourteen years, accompanied by Sita and Lakshman. During a hunt, Ravan attacks their camp. Sita aids the injured Jatayu but is captured after losing consciousness in the struggle. Upon regaining her senses, she attempts to harm Ravan, only to be stopped by an acquaintance, Samichi.

Traditionally, the "Ramayana" is narrated from Ram's perspective, marginalizing Sita to the role of a dutiful wife, devoid of individuality. Amish's portrayal diverges significantly, presenting Sita as a resilient, intelligent warrior. Raised by Sunaina, who empowers her daughter's independence, Sita exhibits courage and defiance from a young age. At eight, she ventures into the slums without permission, befriending Samichi, a slum resident who aids the community. Her adventures continue with the gift of an Arabian horse from her uncle Kushadhvaj. She confronts him when he attempts to incorporate Mithila into Sankashya, showcasing her directness and bravery.

Rishi Vishwamitra, impressed by Sita's skills, selects her as the next Vishnu. Despite her mother's illness and subsequent death, Sita fulfills her duties, governing Mithila and implementing reforms with Samichi's assistance. She continues her preparation to become Vishnu, visiting places like Agasthyakoodam, where people revere her presence. Upon learning about Ram, she orchestrates their marriage, leading to Ram and Sita fighting side by side against Ravan's assault. Sita's prowess in martial arts is highlighted throughout, demonstrating her exceptional abilities.

Amish's "Sita" is not depicted as a passive, subservient character. She is a leader, a savior, and an adept administrator. Her story intertwines with the original narrative, yet it challenges and reimagines traditional portrayals. Unlike the conventional emphasis on Sita's beauty, Amish focuses on her courage and skills. Sita defends her camp against Ravan's attack, displaying extraordinary combat abilities. She accompanies Ram into exile, embracing the challenges of forest life as opportunities for growth.

Amish's "Sita" is a profound departure from traditional representations, embodying contemporary values of women's empowerment. The narrative challenges the Manusmriti's guidelines on women's roles, offering Sita equal opportunities. She attends Gurukul, receiving education in philosophy, mathematics, science, and martial arts. Her guru, Shvetaketu, and sage Vishwamitra conduct secret rituals, empowering her to combat evil.

Amish deconstructs the submissive Sita, presenting a modern, educated, and powerful woman. He reimagines Sita's origin story, portraying her as found by Queen Sunaina in a forest, saved from wolves by a vulture. This dramatic retelling aligns with contemporary notions of empowered women. Sita, alongside her parents,

Janak, and Sunaina, showcases strength in military actions and statecraft, while King Janaka is depicted as a passive philosopher.

In challenging the dominant narrative, Amish crafts a new collection of “verbal artifacts” that resonate with modern concepts of female empowerment. Sita is portrayed as a courageous, intelligent, and skilled warrior. She defends Mithila, implements reforms, and leads with tenacity and intelligence. This reimagined Sita is a stark contrast to the traditional submissive portrayal, embodying contemporary ideals of gender equality and women’s rights.

Amish Tripathi’s “Sita” exemplifies the alignment between modern expectations of women’s empowerment and the reinterpretation of ancient texts. He challenges patriarchal narratives, offering a new system of symbols and empowering characters like Sita. This counter-narrative restores agency and dignity to characters previously marginalized, reflecting contemporary values and promoting gender equality.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s “The Forest of Enchantments”

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s “The Forest of Enchantments” is a remarkable contemporary retelling of the classic “Ramayana”, examining the character of Sita from a unique perspective. Narrated in the first person from Sita’s viewpoint, the text delves into her previously unexplored experiences in Lanka under the sadness tree. Alongside Sita, the narrative introduces lesser-known female characters such as Sunayna, Urmila, Kaikeyi, Shanta, Mandodari, Surpanakha, and Sarama, often underestimated in mainstream accounts. Sita brings these characters to life, feeling a profound responsibility to tell their stories, as she is filled with the voices of these marginalized women urging, “Write our tale, too.” These women have long been marginalized, underestimated, misinterpreted, criticized, neglected, and exploited as cautionary examples (Banerjee, 4). This modern retelling, through Sita’s first-person narrative, provides a fresh appeal to twenty-first-century readers.

Despite being a retelling, the novel maintains the grandeur and sublimity of its characters. The feminist reinterpretation does not detract from the greatness of mythological figures such as Ram and Laxman. Divakaruni ensures that their language reflects their nobility and grandeur. Her intention is not to vilify male characters but to present them with dignity. Ram is portrayed with grandeur and Laxman with respect. Sita emerges as a nature lover and healer, skilled in martial arts, courageous, and self-confident, thus shedding the traditional image of a passive and submissive woman. The authentic portrayal of Sita establishes a connection with every woman, depicting her as a devoted daughter, faithful wife, and nurturing sister. The narrative illuminates Sita’s hardships in Ashoka Vatika, often overlooked by the average reader.

The novel gives voice to marginalized individuals, allowing them to share their perspectives. Queen Sunaina, portrayed with grace, royalty, and caution, is shown as a visionary who monitors the kingdom and assists her husband in court affairs. She begins clandestine martial arts instruction with Sita, preparing her daughters to navigate royal politics and masculine egos. Sunaina teaches them endurance, encapsulated in her advice: “Draw on your inner strength. Remember, you can be your worst enemy or best friend. It’s up to you. And also this: what you can’t change, you must endure” (Divakaruni 54). Sunaina’s maternal worries are evident as she commissions a healing facility for Sita to harness her healing abilities for the well-being of Mithila’s people.

Queen Kaushalya, the less favored queen of King Dashrath and Sita’s true mother-in-law, is depicted as a submissive figure who warmly welcomes Sita despite her own sufferings. Sita experiences Kaushalya’s grief and understands the challenges of being less favored and disregarded by her husband. Ram acknowledges his mother’s difficult situation, noting that some individuals are born unfortunate, appearing abundant externally but lacking internally.

Ahalya, misunderstood and cursed by her husband Sage Gautam, is reinterpreted to cleanse her of undeserved shame. Sita questions the reason for Ahalya’s suffering, drawing a parallel with the concept of karma. Divakaruni aims to depict the plight of a powerless woman, emphasizing Ahalya’s obligation to comply with her husband’s desires and the ineffectiveness of love in repairing relationships dominated by mistrust.

Surpanakha, Ravana’s sister seeking affection, is given a voice to express her situation from Sita’s perspective. Despite her mutilation by Laxmana, Sita feels immense pity for her, questioning the cruelty towards someone seeking love. Sita believes that life with a disfigured face is not preferable to death, especially for a woman desiring a partner (Divakaruni 151). The narrative portrays Surpanakha’s human emotions and misunderstood desires, challenging traditional gender norms.

Queen Mandodari of Lanka, shown as deeply sorrowful, is unable to prevent the impending catastrophe caused by Ravana’s actions. The narrative reveals Mandodari as Sita’s estranged mother, demonstrating unconditional affection towards her. Despite Sita’s refusal of insincere affection, Mandodari is given an opportunity to articulate her sadness and distress, integrating her into the central narrative.

Urmila, Sita’s sister, is portrayed as a figure of utmost patience, dedication, sacrifice, and love. Her sacrifice and solitude during Laxmana’s fourteen-year exile are immortalized in Divakaruni’s narrative. Urmila’s character, though often neglected in traditional retellings, is vital to the story, representing unacknowledged sacrifices.

Kaikeyi, traditionally vilified in Valmiki's "Ramayana", is reinterpreted as a powerful, skillful charioteer and advisor to King Dashrath. Sita's mother's admiration for Kaikeyi's healing abilities piques Sita's interest in her. Despite her cunning personality causing challenges for Ram, Sita, and Laxman, Kaikeyi is treated with dignity, highlighting her role in the narrative about patriarchy, power dynamics, and political affairs.

The heroes of the "Ramayana", Prince Rama and his brothers, embody the virtues of a patriarchal society, adhering strictly to gender roles and expectations. Divakaruni's narrative challenges these norms by presenting Sita as a strong, independent woman, defying the traditional depiction of her as submissive.

Divakaruni's account deviates from the original by rejecting the notion of Sita's miraculous birth, instead presenting it as a part of her family history. This humanizes Sita, allowing her to recount her origin story with commentary. Queen Sunaina, who raises Sita and educates her in combat skills, breaks the notion of the perfect, obedient, and domestic Sita portrayed in the "Ramayana". Divakaruni grants Sita autonomy and romantic involvement with Rama, while keeping her seclusion within the realm of women, making the narrative more relatable and slightly romantic.

Rewriting canonical texts and critically analyzing India's intricate history and cultural heritage involves challenging traditional cultural narratives and creating new stories about women. The humanities focus on these silenced, forgotten, or marginalized tales, highlighting their conventional nature and structural patterns.

Historian Hayden White emphasized storytelling and moral interpretation, suggesting that historical narratives organize occurrences with apparent ideological and political connotations, which may have beneficial or adverse outcomes (White 1-2). Marita Svane stresses considering the counter-narratives nature, arguing that grand narratives like the Enlightenment and Marxism have been affected by François Lyotard's conception of their breakdown. "Counternarrative" refers to stories challenging and contradicting dominant narratives, potentially influencing audiences positively or negatively.

Devdutt Pattanaik's "Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana"

Devdutt Pattanaik's "Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana" delves deep into the multifaceted life of Sita, Ram's wife, exploring her upbringing with her father Janaka, her forest exile, her time in Lanka, her communion with nature, and her role in deifying Ram. Pattanaik intricately portrays various interpretations of the Ramayana, focusing solely on Sita, and engages with ongoing feminist debates about Ram's adherence to dharma and his abandonment of Sita. He emphasizes the moral ambiguity of the story, where clear distinctions between good and evil dissolve, centering the plot on two lovers constrained by societal norms and ideas.

The narrative uncovers lesser-known stories about characters such as Kaikeyi, the king's life-saving charioteer, Manthara, Kaikeyi's wet nurse, and Sita, depicted as a curious and clever young girl. Pattanaik's retelling traverses through the vast expanse of Ramayana adaptations, from Valmiki's original to Sanskrit dramas, Puranas, regional variations across India, Jain and Buddhist traditions, and even Southeast Asian renditions.

Pattanaik's Ramayana is not a mere recapitulation of Valmiki's tale. He contrasts culture, which imposes societal laws, with nature, which is boundless. He juxtaposes Ram, a monarch who upholds rules, with Krishna, a kingmaker who bends them, highlighting symbols, metaphors, motifs, and patterns throughout. His potent and concise writing vividly conveys the story's rich emotional landscape, including affection, loyalty, love, greed, passion, and malice, evoking profound empathy in the reader.

Pattanaik also sheds light on the narrative's evolution over the years, urging readers to scrutinize the actions, thoughts, and behaviors of the characters. He presents analyses by various scholars and poets, questioning their accuracy and incorporating Western interpretations of the story, which he argues were manipulated to support British colonial dominance in India. He criticizes oppressors and politicians for using these narratives to further their agendas.

Pattanaik distinguishes between truth and science, frequently titling his works "My Gita" and "My Hanuman Chalisa" to indicate his personal interpretations. This reflects the subjective nature of retellings and reinterpretations, where each author presents their version of the truth. While some claim that Valmiki's Ramayana is the definitive version, authors like Ashok Banker, Amish Tripathi, and Pattanaik offer subjectively faithful retellings. Marshall McLuhan's thesis in "The Gutenberg Galaxy" argues that printed texts become fixed, while mythological stories, passed down orally, evolve with each retelling, reflecting the author's subjective interpretation.

Mythology is contentious, especially in Hindu traditions, where there is a belief in one absolute truth—God. Many resist scientific and logical explanations behind mythological gods due to social, cultural, and political prejudices in rigid and conservative societies. However, authors like Pattanaik aim to revitalize myths for today's youth, connecting them to India's rich mythological past and educating them.

This study underscores the significance of Pattanaik's re-evaluation of the Ramayana, particularly his portrayal of Sita, which influences Indian narrative traditions, norms, and culture. Pattanaik's version emphasizes Sita's humanity and compassion, diverging from conventional portrayals of her as a deity. Arundhati Venkatesh, in her book review, notes that Pattanaik reveals hidden intricacies and lesser-known histories. The inquisitive Sita transforms into a wise and understanding figure, adept in multiple fields, and a self-reliant single mother to her sons.

The narrative emphasizes aspects of the Ramayana often overlooked in Valmiki or Tulsidas's renditions, which focus on King Rama and the Ikshvaku dynasty while neglecting the smaller yet significant events involving female characters. For instance, when King Janaka discovers Sita, born from the earth, he embraces her as his daughter, highlighting the social dimensions of fatherhood beyond biological ties. This episode, and others like it, question societal norms and encourage a re-examination of historical truths.

King Janaka, inspired by the visionary Sulabha, convenes a gathering of scholars to explore various worldviews, marking an early instance of global intellectual exchange. Sita, alongside her father, attends this conference, becoming the first and youngest female to contribute to the Upanishads. Her education and contributions underscore the vital role of women's education in Indian culture.

Pattanaik's narrative challenges traditional gender norms, portraying Sita as an educated, proficient, and accomplished individual. Her depiction as both Gauri and Kaali, capable of fierce combat and profound wisdom, defies the conventional image of a passive and dependent woman. The dialogue between Sita and Lakshman after the Agni-pariksha and her abandonment further explores themes of gender and societal expectations.

Women in mythology, often linked to nature, play crucial roles in forestry, agriculture, water management, and traditional sciences, as observed in Shiva's writings. Pattanaik's Sita exemplifies this connection, embodying both a well-maintained garden and a wild forest, supporting feminist principles.

The relationship between Sita and Surpanakha illustrates communal womanhood and redemption through dialogue. This re-examination of the Ramayana, emphasizing narrative, norms, and nation, aims to achieve political and social equilibrium and offer fresh perspectives on societal understanding.

Thus, Pattanaik's "Sita" is a powerful retelling that not only reimagines an ancient epic but also challenges contemporary readers to rethink traditional narratives and societal norms, particularly concerning women's roles and contributions.

Conclusion

Each retelling of mythological texts contemporaneously addresses issues in the original narratives, adding a modern twist. In "Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana", Devdutt Pattanaik provides a comprehensive reinterpretation from Sita's point of view. Despite new narrative techniques, the core story remains unchanged, reflecting India's cultural diversity and the consistent need for mythical and historical narratives.

Today's youth's interest in exploring cultural roots and the global appeal of these stories contribute to their popularity. Shifting the narrative perspective to

humanize the Gods changes how readers perceive them, as characters exhibit human emotions and experiences. Modern retellings offer a fresh viewpoint, amplifying underrepresented voices and challenging patriarchal norms. Tales like “Sita: Warrior of Mithila” are rare and unique, portraying Sita as a strong, independent, and logical woman. Each retelling reflects a growing maturity in the understanding of the Ramayana, with Divakaruni’s “The Forest of Enchantments” presenting Sita in a new, empowered light.

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