

FROM SILENCE TO SELFHOOD: RECLAIMING WOMEN'S VOICES IN INDIAN MYTHOLOGICAL RETELLINGS BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI AND KAVITA KANÉ

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Abstract:

The classical Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, have traditionally functioned as monumental repositories of patriarchal dharma, wherein female characters are frequently relegated to the periphery serving as catalysts for male heroism, passive victims of dynastic ambition, or flat archetypes of virtue and vice. This paper examines the phenomenon of feminist revisionist mythmaking in contemporary Indian English literature, focusing on the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kané. By analyzing Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, alongside Kané's *Sita's Sister* and *Lanka's Princess*, this study explores how these authors dismantle the androcentric architecture of the epics. The paper argues that Divakaruni and Kané do not merely retell the myths; they epistemologically shift the narrative locus from the male epicenter to the female margins. Through this subversion, silenced and vilified women such as Urmila, Surpanakha, Sita, and Draupadi reclaim their narrative agency,

transforming from passive objects of epic history into the active, articulate subjects of their own destinies. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how modern mythological fiction serves as a crucial site for interrogating contemporary gender politics and dismantling systemic patriarchal erasure.

Abbreviations

FOE = The Forest of Enchantments

LP = Lanka's Princess

POI = The Palace of Illusions SS = Sita's Sister

From Periphery to Centre: Reclaiming Marginalized Women's Voices in Indian Mythological Retellings by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kané

"To reclaim the myth is to reclaim the self. When the silenced women of the epics finally speak, they do not merely tell a different story; they dismantle the very foundations of the patriarchal history that erased them."



Introduction: The Architecture of Epic Erasure

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata, attributed to the sages Valmiki and Vyasa respectively, form the bedrock of Indian cultural and moral consciousness. However, these foundational texts are inherently androcentric. They are epics of men their wars, their dharma, their lineage, and their spiritual crises. Within this grand patriarchal architecture, female characters are systematically marginalized. They are often constructed as one-dimensional archetypes: the ideal, long-suffering wife (pativrata), the destructive temptress, or the tragic victim whose violation justifies male retribution. Their internal psychological landscapes, their traumas, and their intellectual contributions are routinely exiled to the narrative periphery.

In recent decades, Indian English literature has witnessed a surge in feminist revisionist mythmaking. This genre seeks to excavate the buried voices of epic women, offering a subversive counter-narrative to the classical texts. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kané stand at the vanguard of this literary movement. While they employ distinct narrative strategies, both authors share a common ideological imperative: to forcefully shift the narrative gaze from the center to the periphery, granting the power of the "I" to women who were previously spoken for, or silenced altogether.

The Epistemology of the Margins

To understand the radical nature of this reclamation, one must first understand the epistemology of epic marginalization. In the classical texts, a woman's value is entirely contingent upon her utility to the male protagonist or the dynastic bloodline. When she ceases to be useful, or when she transgresses the rigid boundaries of dharma, she is either villainized or erased.

Divakaruni and Kane challenge this by treating the margins not as spaces of absence, but as sites of profound epistemological resistance. By adopting the first-person perspective or a closely focalized third-person narrative of these women, the authors expose the structural violence of the epic world. The wars that are glorified as righteous (dharma yuddha) in the original texts are re-examined through the female gaze as exercises in mass slaughter, ego, and the catastrophic destruction of the domestic sphere. The women are no longer collateral damage; they are the primary critics of the epic patriarchy.

Divakaruni's Cartography: Re-centering the Epic Heroines

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's approach to revisionist mythmaking often involves taking the central, celebrated female figures of the epics Draupadi in The Palace of Illusions (POI) and Sita in The Forest of Enchantments (FOE) and stripping away the layers of patriarchal deification to reveal their deeply human, rebellious cores.

In POI, Draupadi (Panchaali) refuses the passive role assigned to her by destiny and the Kuru elders. Divakaruni gives Panchaali a distinct, sharp, and often cynical voice. She critiques the hypocrisy of her five husbands and the devastating cost of their ambition. Her narrative reclaims her sexuality, her political acumen, and her profound, unacknowledged bond with Karna.

Similarly, in FOE, Divakaruni dismantles the archetype of Sita as the submissive pativrata. Her Sita is fiercely independent, deeply connected to the natural world, and acutely aware of the injustices inflicted upon women in the name of Ram-Rajya (the ideal rule of Ram). The climax of Divakaruni's retelling is Sita's final descent into the earth. Rather than a tragic retreat, it is framed as an ultimate act of autonomy a categorical rejection of a society and a husband who repeatedly demand the public humiliation of the Agnipariksha (trial by fire) to prove her purity.

Kané's Excavation: Voicing the Forgotten and the Vilified

While Divakaruni re-interprets the primary heroines, Kavita Kané's brilliance lies in her excavation of the absolute periphery. She gives voice to women who were actively forgotten or aggressively vilified by the classical texts.

In Sita's Sister (SS), Kané centers Urmila, the wife of Lakshmana. In Valmiki's Ramayana, Urmila is virtually erased, left behind in Ayodhya for fourteen years while her husband follows Ram into exile.

Kané transforms Urmila's silence into an active, intellectual endurance. Urmila is portrayed as a scholar and a fiercely pragmatic woman who holds the fractured royal household together during the exile. Her fourteen-year wait is stripped of romantic idealization and exposed as a profound trauma inflicted by Lakshmana's blind adherence to fraternal duty over marital responsibility.

Even more radically, in Lanka's Princess (LP), Kané reclaims Surpanakha, the demoness whose mutilation by Lakshmana triggers the Ramayana war. Classical texts portray her merely as a grotesque, hypersexualized monster. Kané humanizes her, exploring the childhood trauma, the systemic abuse by her brother Ravana, and the complex psychological motivations that lead to her fateful encounter in the Dandaka forest. Kané forces the reader to confront the violence of epic heroism, demonstrating how the physical mutilation of a marginalized woman is casually justified by the text's patriarchal heroes.

Sisterhood and the Subversion of Patriarchy

A critical intersection in the works of both authors is the emphasis on female solidarity and sisterhood. In the classical epics, women are frequently isolated from one another, their relationships mediated entirely through men. Divakaruni and Kané subvert this by constructing powerful networks of female support that operate outside male surveillance.

Whether it is the profound bond between Sita and Urmila in Kané's work, or Sita's deep empathy for the marginalized women she encounters in the forest and in Lanka (such as Mandodari and Trijata) in Divakaruni's FOE, these narratives propose that female liberation is inherently communal. These women find solace, counsel, and survival in one another, creating a subaltern counter-culture that resists the dictates of the male-dominated epic world.

Conclusion: The Politics of Mythological Reclamation

To conclude, the mythological retellings by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kané represent a vital literary intervention in the landscape of Indian English fiction. By moving marginalized women from the periphery to the center, these authors achieve much more than mere narrative novelty; they engage in a profound act of literary justice.

Through the unapologetic, articulate voices of Draupadi, Sita, Urmila, and Surpanakha, the reader is compelled to re-evaluate the ethical foundations of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Divakaruni and Kané expose the gendered violence inherent in epic heroism and the heavy toll that male ambition exacts upon the domestic sphere. Ultimately, these retellings demonstrate that the ancient myths are not static relics of the past, but dynamic, living texts.

By reclaiming them, contemporary women writers ensure that the silenced voices of the epic margins are finally heard, fundamentally altering our understanding of history, mythology, and female agency.

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