

From Canon to Counter-Canon: Reimagining Indian Mythology through Marginal Voices in Contemporary Fiction

Dilip Kumar Reddy V¹, Sudhakar Reddy Devireddy²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Anurag University, Venkatapur, Hyderabad, Telangana, India & Jr. Lecturer in English, Telangana Minorities Residential Junior College for Boys, Chandrayangutta, Telangana, India.
²Associate Professor, Dept. of English, Anurag University, Hyderabad, Telangana, India.

ABSTRACT

Indian mythology has traditionally circulated through powerful canonical narratives in which kings, gods, warriors and idealized figures occupy the centre of cultural memory. Yet the apparent stability of these narratives conceals multiple silenced perspectives: women whose lives are narrated through patriarchal frameworks, communities positioned outside dominant social structures, and characters whose identities have been defined by victorious or socially privileged narrators. Contemporary Indian fiction increasingly challenges this hierarchy by transforming mythological retelling into an act of narrative reclamation. This article examines how selected contemporary fictional works Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012) and the broader literary afterlife of Ekalavya's construct a movement from canonical narration towards a counter-canon. Drawing on postcolonial theory, feminist literary criticism, Bakhtinian dialogism and subaltern perspectives, the study employs qualitative close reading and comparative textual analysis. It argues that contemporary mythological fiction does not simply modernize ancient stories; it contests the authority to determine whose experiences constitute cultural knowledge. Draupadi, Sita, Ravana and Ekalavya's consequently become sites through which gender, caste, power, memory and identity are renegotiated. The article proposes that counter-canonical mythology should be understood not as the rejection of tradition but as a dialogic expansion of it, enabling Indian fiction to transform inherited narratives into contested and plural cultural spaces.

Keywords: Indian mythology, counter-canon, marginal voices, myth retelling, feminist fiction

INTRODUCTION

Indian mythology is not a closed archive. Its stories have travelled across centuries through Sanskrit epics, regional literatures, oral traditions, performances, folk narratives, devotional practices and modern popular culture. The Ramayana and Mahabharata, in particular, have generated an extraordinary range of interpretations. Their continuing cultural authority, however, has often encouraged the perception that their characters possess fixed moral identities: Rama as righteous king, Sita as ideal woman, Draupadi as wronged wife, Ravana as villain and Ekalavya as the devoted but ultimately defeated disciple. Contemporary Indian fiction increasingly unsettles such fixed identities. Rather than treating mythology as a finished narrative inherited from the past, contemporary writers approach it as a textual and cultural field in which meanings can be renegotiated. The question consequently changes from "What happened in the myth?" to "Who has been permitted to tell what happened?"

This distinction is central to the movement from canon to counter-canon. A canonical narrative establishes a dominant structure of memory, morality and identity. A counter-canonical narrative does not necessarily destroy that structure; instead, it introduces voices, experiences and interpretive possibilities excluded from the dominant account.

The phenomenon is especially significant in contemporary Indian fiction because mythology remains closely connected to questions of social identity. Retelling an epic is therefore never merely an aesthetic exercise. When Draupadi narrates the Mahabharata, gendered authority becomes an issue. When Sita narrates the Ramayana, the relationship between womanhood, duty and autonomy is reconsidered. When Ravana and the Asuras narrate their own history, the binary between victories and vanquished is questioned. Similarly, the continuing reinterpretation of Ekalavya's exposes the relationship between mythology and caste hierarchy.

Recent scholarship has specifically identified Ekalavya's as an important figure in post-Independence retellings, including Dalit cultural production, where his story becomes associated with resistance to caste oppression. This article therefore examines contemporary Indian mythological fiction as a process of narrative redistribution. Its central argument is that counter-canonical retellings challenge not only the representation of marginal characters but also the epistemological authority of the canon itself. They ask who possesses the right to remember, interpret and reinterpret cultural history.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND RESEARCH GAP

Scholarship on Indian mythology has increasingly moved away from treating epic narratives as fixed and authoritative cultural texts. **Ramanujan (1991)**, in his influential essay “Three Hundred Ramayana’s,” demonstrates that the *Ramayana* exists through multiple narrative traditions rather than a single, universally authoritative version. His discussion of regional and culturally differentiated telling establishes an important foundation for understanding myth as a plural and continually reconstructed tradition. **Richman (1991)** similarly argues that the existence of multiple *Ramayana*’s reflects the cultural diversity of South Asia, suggesting that variation and reinterpretation are intrinsic to the transmission of epic narratives rather than deviations from an original text. These perspectives are particularly relevant to contemporary fiction because they establish that rewriting mythology is part of a much longer interpretive tradition.

From a historical perspective, **Thapar (2000)** examines the relationship between historical memory, cultural traditions and the construction of India’s past. Her work demonstrates that cultural narratives cannot be separated from the social and ideological contexts in which they are produced and transmitted. This perspective is useful for analysing contemporary mythological fiction because modern retellings often recover characters whose identities have been shaped by dominant interpretations of the past.

The theoretical question of whose voice receives cultural authority becomes particularly important through **Spivak’s (1988)** concept of the subaltern. Spivak questions whether marginalized subjects can genuinely “speak” within structures of representation controlled by dominant groups. Her argument is relevant to mythological retellings because contemporary authors frequently claim to give voice to characters that were historically represented by others. However, Spivak’s framework also encourages a critical examination of whether such literary voices constitute genuine recovery or contemporary reconstruction. Thus, the problem is not simply the absence of marginal characters from mythology but the conditions under which their voices are represented.

Bakhtin (1984) provides another important theoretical perspective through his concept of dialogism. Bakhtin views literary meaning as emerging through the interaction of different voices rather than through a single authoritative discourse. Applied to Indian mythological fiction, this approach suggests that contemporary retellings do not necessarily erase canonical narratives. Instead, they introduce competing perspectives into an established narrative structure. The canonical and counter-canonical versions can therefore coexist in a productive dialogue.

In the field of adaptation and rewriting, **Hutcheon (1988)** argues that reinterpretation can challenge established understandings of history, identity and representation. Her approach is especially relevant to contemporary mythological fiction because retelling involves both repetition and difference: readers recognise the inherited story while simultaneously encountering an alternative interpretation. The significance of a retelling therefore lies not simply in what remains unchanged but in what the new version makes newly visible.

Genette (1980) provides a narratological basis for analysing this transformation through his discussion of narrative discourse, perspective and focalisation. Changing the narrative perspective can fundamentally alter the reader’s understanding of an event without necessarily changing the basic sequence of events. This concept is particularly significant in feminist mythological fiction, where familiar epic events are reconstructed through the consciousness of women who were previously represented primarily from external perspectives.

Gender constitutes one of the most prominent areas of contemporary mythological revision. **Butler (2004)** argues that gender identities are produced and regulated through social norms rather than existing as completely fixed categories. Although Butler’s work is not specifically concerned with Indian mythology, its theoretical implications are valuable for examining representations of Sita and Draupadi. Contemporary retellings can expose how ideals of femininity, obedience, sacrifice and honour are culturally constructed and maintained.

Divakaruni’s later novel, ***The Forest of Enchantments (2019)***, extends this feminist intervention to the *Ramayana*. By placing Sita at the centre of the narrative and giving greater attention to women such as Kaikeyi, Surpanakha and Mandodari, the novel questions the tendency of traditional readings to privilege male heroes while reducing women to symbolic or supporting roles. The novel therefore demonstrates how the counter-canon can operate through the multiplication of women’s perspectives rather than merely reversing the gender hierarchy.

Recent scholarship strengthens this interpretation. **Saraswat (2025)** examines Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* through the categories of subjectivity, agency and feminism. Saraswat argues that Divakaruni’s representation transforms Draupadi from a traditionally interpreted epic woman into a more autonomous subject whose consciousness becomes central to the narrative. This study is important because it confirms the feminist significance of the novel; however, its principal emphasis is on Draupadi. The broader relationship between feminist mythmaking and the construction of a counter-canon remains comparatively underexplored.

The question of marginality extends beyond gender to the representation of defeated communities. **Neelakantan (2012)**, in *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, reconstructs the *Ramayana* through the perspectives of Ravana and the Asura community. Instead of accepting the conventional division between righteous victor and evil vanquished figure, the novel asks readers to consider how history might appear from the perspective of those who lose. Ravana consequently becomes more than a mythological antagonist; he becomes a vehicle through which the relationship between power, history and narrative authority can be reconsidered.

Caste provides another important dimension to the study of counter-canonical mythology. **Doniger (2014)** examines the changing cultural significance of Ekalavya's and notes how his story has been appropriated within Dalit contexts. The transformation is significant because Ekalavya can shift from being interpreted primarily as a devoted disciple to becoming a symbol of exclusion and resistance. His story consequently demonstrates how a canonical narrative can acquire new political meanings when interpreted from the perspective of historically marginalized communities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study combines four complementary theoretical perspectives.

- First, postcolonial theory provides a framework for examining representation and narrative authority. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential question concerning whether the subaltern can speak remains particularly productive when applied to mythology. The issue is not simply whether marginal characters are given words, but whether their speech is permitted to alter the structure through which they are understood.
- Second, feminist literary criticism makes visible the gendered organisation of mythological narratives. Traditional epic structures frequently position women as objects of exchange, honor, desire, sacrifice or moral judgement. A feminist retelling can therefore become a redistribution of narrative agency.
- Third, Bakhtinian dialogism helps conceptualize myth as a field of competing voices rather than a single authoritative discourse. A retelling introduces another consciousness into an already familiar narrative. The older version does not disappear; instead, it enters into dialogue with the new one.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative, interpretive and comparative textual methodology. The primary corpus consists of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), and Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012), supplemented by critical scholarship on Ekalavya's modern reinterpretations. The analysis uses close reading to examine narrative voice, focalization, characterization, silence, agency, memory and the redistribution of moral authority. The texts are not treated as empirical evidence of social behaviour; rather, they are analysed as literary interventions in cultural discourse. The comparative method is particularly appropriate because the selected works revise different mythological traditions and marginal positions. Draupadi and Sita represent gendered marginality within epic structures, while Ravana and Ekalavya's enable consideration of social exclusion, defeated identity and caste-coded hierarchy.

Canonical Myth to Counter-Canon

The canon depends partly upon repetition. A story becomes culturally authoritative because it is repeatedly transmitted, taught, performed and interpreted. Repetition can create the illusion of inevitability: the hero becomes naturally heroic, the villain naturally villainous, and the marginal character naturally secondary. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi is no longer primarily seen from the outside. Her experiences become the organizing principle of the narrative. Scholarship on the novel repeatedly identifies this shift from object to subject, noting the importance of Draupadi subjectivity, agency and individual voice.

This transformation is more significant than merely giving a female character additional dialogue. It changes the reader's relationship with the epic itself. Events traditionally remembered through male warriors and political conflicts acquire emotional, psychological and gendered dimensions. War is no longer only a struggle for kingdoms; it becomes connected to humiliation, desire, loyalty, resentment and the consequences imposed upon women. The counter-canon therefore works through focalization. The event remains recognizable, but its meaning changes because the observer changes.

The same strategy operates in *The Forest of Enchantments*. Divakaruni explicitly positions Sita at the centre and also brings other women traditionally placed at the margins—Kaikeyi, Surpanakha and Mandodari into greater narrative visibility. The effect is a multiplication of female perspectives rather than a simple replacement of Rama with Sita. This is crucial because marginality is not homogeneous. Women themselves occupy different positions within systems of power. Sita, Kaikeyi, Surpanakha and Mandodari cannot be reduced to a single category of "victim." Their relationships to sexuality, marriage, political power, motherhood and cultural legitimacy differ.

Re-centering Women: Draupadi and Sita

Draupadi and Sita occupy an unusual position within Indian cultural memory. They are simultaneously powerful and constrained. Their stories have been repeatedly used to construct ideals of womanhood, yet their own perspectives have often remained subordinate to the moral lessons imposed upon them.

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* intervenes by making Draupadi the narrator. This narrative decision converts her from an epic symbol into a consciousness. Recent scholarship characterises this transformation in terms of subjectivity, agency and feminist revision.

Draupadi's marginality is paradoxical. She is central to the political and emotional trajectory of the Mahabharata, yet she is frequently interpreted through relationships with men—daughter of Drupada, wife of the Pandavas, desired by Karna, humiliated by the Kauravas. The novel disrupts this relational definition by asking what happens when Draupadi defines herself.

Importantly, these novels do not simply make their heroines modern women transported into ancient India. Their strategy is more complex. Contemporary ethical questions are introduced into mythological frameworks without eliminating the historical distance between them.

The counter-canon emerges precisely because the reader knows the canonical story. The emotional force of Sita's and Draupadi's voices depends upon the prior familiarity of the audience with their conventional representations. Retelling therefore operates through recognition and disruption simultaneously.

Ravana, Ekalavya and the Politics of the Vanquished

Gender is only one dimension of marginality. The counter-canon becomes more politically significant when it addresses the distinction between the powerful and the excluded.

Asura: Tale of the Vanquished provides a particularly direct example. Neelakantan's reimagines the Ramayana through Ravana and the Asura community, explicitly framing the novel around the possibility that the defeated possess a different history from the one preserved by the victors.

The significance of this narrative strategy lies in its challenge to moral binaries. If Rama's victory is traditionally interpreted as the triumph of good over evil, then Ravana's perspective raises a disturbing question: who determines the categories of good and evil? The counter-canon does not necessarily establish Ravana as morally innocent. Rather, it humanizes and historicizes him. He becomes a political subject rather than merely a mythological villain. This is an important distinction. Counter-canonical fiction is strongest when it does not replace one absolute truth with another. Its purpose is to expose the incompleteness of absolute narratives. Ekalavya's presents an even more direct challenge to social hierarchy. His story in the Mahabharata has traditionally been interpreted through devotion to the guru and the tragic consequences of his sacrifice. Yet modern Dalit reinterpretations have transformed Ekalavya's into a figure of structural exclusion and resistance.

Myth, Memory and Contemporary Identity

Mythology provides a cultural vocabulary through which contemporary societies can discuss enduring conflicts. Gender inequality, caste exclusion, political legitimacy, social hierarchy and questions of identity can all be projected into mythological frameworks. Myth therefore operates through what may be called cultural afterlife. An ancient narrative remains active because later generations continually reinterpret it.

- When Draupadi speaks, the reader is invited to reconsider gender.
- When Sita speaks, the reader is invited to reconsider duty and autonomy.
- When Ravana speaks, the reader is invited to reconsider victory and defeat.
- When Ekalavya's is reclaimed, the reader is invited to reconsider caste and access to knowledge.

These perspectives demonstrate that marginality is not simply a position of silence. It can become a position from which dominant narratives are interrogated. A writer necessarily mediates the voice being represented. Divakaruni's Draupadi is not the historical Draupadi, Neelakantan's Ravana is not an archaeological recovery of an ancient Asura consciousness. They are contemporary literary constructions. This does not invalidate their political significance. Instead, it requires readers to distinguish between recovering a lost voice and imagining a possible voice. The counter-canon is therefore not the discovery of a hidden original. It is the creation of alternative narrative possibilities.

RETELLING TO REWRITING CULTURAL AUTHORITY

The most significant contribution of contemporary mythological fiction lies not in changing plot events but in changing the distribution of narrative authority.

Traditional canonical structures often establish a hierarchy:

Hero → Narrator → History → Cultural truth

Counter-canonical fiction disrupts this sequence:

Marginal subject → Alternative narrator → Contested memory → Plural truth

This does not mean that every alternative interpretation is equally valid. Rather, it means that cultural authority becomes open to dialogue. This is where Bakhtinian dialogism becomes especially relevant. The counter-canon introduces another voice into an established narrative field. The old and new stories coexist, producing tension rather than closure. Such literary plurality is particularly important in the Indian context because there has never been a single uncontested version of the epics. Regional, oral, folk, tribal, devotional and literary traditions have generated numerous Ramayana's and Mahabharatas. Contemporary fiction therefore participates in an older cultural practice of reinterpretation while simultaneously bringing modern questions of gender, caste and identity into the process.

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to contemporary literary scholarship in three ways.

- First, it proposes counter-canonical mythmaking as a useful framework for connecting feminist, subaltern and caste-conscious reinterpretations that are often studied separately.
- Second, it argues that the politics of mythological retelling operates primarily through narrative authority, not simply character revision. The central question is not whether a writer changes a character but whether the character receives the capacity to interpret the world.
- Third, the study demonstrates that contemporary mythological fiction can function as a form of cultural memory work. By revisiting familiar figures, writers reveal the exclusions embedded in inherited cultural narratives.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study has several limitations. First, its corpus is selective rather than exhaustive. Indian mythology exists across numerous languages, regions and literary traditions, and no small corpus can represent this diversity comprehensively. Second, the analysis concentrates primarily on published English-language contemporary fiction and English-mediated scholarship, which limits engagement with the full range of regional-language and oral traditions. Third, the article focuses on textual representation rather than reader reception; it therefore does not claim that literary counter-narratives automatically produce social transformation. Future research could extend the framework through comparative studies of Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Bengali, Malayalam and other regional-language retellings, as well as through reception studies examining how different communities interpret these counter-canonical narratives.

CONCLUSION

The movement from canon to counter-canon in contemporary Indian fiction represents more than a literary fashion for retelling epics. It reflects a deeper transformation in the politics of cultural storytelling. The contemporary writer returns to mythology not because the old stories are exhausted, but because their meanings remain unfinished. The Palace of Illusions transforms Draupadi from an object of epic history into a narrating consciousness. The Forest of Enchantments places Sita and other marginalised women at the centre of the Ramayana. Asura challenges the moral certainty of the victor's narrative by allowing Ravana and the Asuras to imagine their own history. Ekalavya's modern afterlife demonstrates how myth can be appropriated as a language of caste resistance. Together, these texts demonstrate that the canon is never completely closed. Every retelling potentially exposes what an earlier telling could not or would not say. The counter-canon consequently should not be understood as an attempt to replace one authoritative mythology with another. Its deeper function is to make authority itself visible and contestable. It creates space for multiple memories, identities and ethical interpretations to coexist. Indian mythology thus becomes not merely an inheritance from the past but a conversation across time. Its contemporary significance lies precisely in this capacity for renewal. When marginal voices enter the centre of familiar stories, the stories do not become less traditional. They become more plural, more contested and, ultimately, more alive.

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