

Contours of Womanhood: Visual and Textual Reinterpretations of Epic Heroines

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Abstract

Indian epic narratives have long functioned as influential cultural texts that shape ethical values, social norms, and particularly gendered ideals within Hindu society. Among their most enduring figures are Sita from the Ramayana and Draupadi from the Mahabharata, whose lives, actions, and sufferings have served as templates for normative constructions of femininity. This paper undertakes a comparative study of the visual and textual portrayals of these epic heroines by examining Raja Ravi Varma's paintings Sita in Ashoka Grove and Draupadi at the Court of Virat alongside contemporary reinterpretations in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels *The Forest of Enchantments* and *The Palace of Illusions*. The paper argues that while Varma's nineteenth-century paintings visually codify ideals of feminine grace, restraint, and moral duty grounded in classical Hindu mythology and colonial-nationalist aesthetics, Divakaruni's novels engage in a conscious deconstruction of these ideals. Drawing upon gender studies, deconstructive reading practices, and queer theory, the study explores how both visual and textual narratives destabilize fixed notions of womanhood, power, and identity associated with Sita and Draupadi. By placing canvas and prose in dialogue, this study underscores the dynamic nature of myth-making and storytelling, demonstrating how shifts in historical context, artistic medium, and authorial perspective continually reshape representations of feminine ideals. Ultimately, it argues that these retellings whether on canvas or in prose serve as sites of contestation that reveal the plurality, instability, and negotiation inherent in the myth of femininity within Hindu cultural imagination.

Keywords: Visual art, mythological narratives, femininity, female virtue, gender studies, deconstruction, queer theory, myth-making, narrative retellings, identity.

Indian mythology is not just a set of old sacred stories. It is an active part of culture that shares and supports rules about right and wrong, ideas about gender, and beliefs. Epic stories like the Ramayana and Mahabharata shape how people understand morals and behavior across many generations. In these stories, women have a mixed role: they are admired as symbols of good character, but at the same time, they face strict rules and control by men. Epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are not merely literary texts but living traditions that continue to influence collective imagination through ritual, education, performance, and popular culture. Within these narratives, women often emerge as moral signifiers whose bodies, emotions, and actions are invested with symbolic meaning far exceeding their narrative autonomy. Sita and Draupadi, in particular, have been repeatedly invoked as paradigms of ideal womanhood, representing chastity, sacrifice, resilience, and devotion.

However, the elevation of these figures to moral exemplars is accompanied by a persistent marginalization of their voices. The virtues attributed to them are often defined through

suffering, silence, and endurance, rendering feminine virtue synonymous with moral submission. Such representations raise critical questions regarding the ideological work performed by mythology: How are ideals of womanhood constructed, circulated, and sustained? Whose interests do these ideals serve, and how do they shift across historical and cultural contexts? Mythology, though rooted in antiquity, is fundamentally dynamic. Its meanings are continually renegotiated through reinterpretation across media visual, literary, performative, and popular. Each retelling reflects the ideological concerns of its time, revealing changing attitudes toward gender, authority, and identity. Visual art and literature, in particular, play a crucial role in mediating these shifts, offering distinct yet interconnected modes of myth-making.

This paper examines how representations of Sita and Draupadi evolve across two contrasting cultural forms: nineteenth-century mythological painting and contemporary feminist fiction. By analyzing selected visual portrayals alongside modern narrative retellings, the study investigates how traditional constructions of femininity are preserved, aestheticized, questioned, and transformed. The central claim of this study is that earlier visual depictions tend to present and fixate on idealized forms of feminine virtue, whereas contemporary literary interpretations challenge these portrayals by emphasizing female subjectivity, emotional depth, and moral autonomy.

Drawing on gender studies, deconstruction, and queer theory, this comparative analysis positions mythology as a contested cultural terrain. Rather than treating Sita and Draupadi as fixed archetypes, the paper reads them as evolving figures whose meanings shift in response to historical conditions, artistic forms, and ideological interventions. In doing so, it underscores mythology's capacity not only to reinforce dominant norms but also to challenge and reimagine them.

Scholarly engagement with Indian epic narratives has increasingly foregrounded questions of gender, power, and representation. Early critical readings, particularly those rooted in philology and theology, tended to interpret epic women symbolically, focusing on their moral significance rather than their narrative agency. Such approaches reinforced the perception of women as ethical ideals rather than complex individuals.

Feminist criticism, however, has significantly altered the landscape of epic studies. Scholars have interrogated the ways in which epic narratives encode patriarchal values, particularly through the regulation of female sexuality and virtue. The trial by fire endured by Sita and the public humiliation of Draupadi have been widely examined as moments that expose systemic gendered injustice embedded within epic structures.

Critical work on female subjectivity in Indian literature has emphasized the importance of voice and interiority. Studies argue that traditional narratives frequently silence women by privileging male perspectives and heroic quests, relegating women's experiences to the margins. This silencing is not merely narrative but ideological, reinforcing normative gender roles through repetition across generations.

Art-historical scholarship on nineteenth-century mythological painting has highlighted how

visual culture contributed to shaping modern Indian identity. Mythological scenes, rendered through European realist techniques, played a significant role in popularizing standardized images of epic figures. These images circulated widely through prints and reproductions, contributing to the formation of a shared visual vocabulary of femininity grounded in modesty, grace, and aesthetic restraint.

Contemporary literary criticism has examined feminist retellings of mythology as acts of revision and resistance. Such narratives reclaim female voices by re-centering the epic from women's perspectives, challenging the moral absolutism of traditional interpretations. While these studies analyze literary reinterpretations in depth, fewer works place them in sustained dialogue with visual traditions of myth-making.

This paper addresses that gap by offering a comparative framework that reads visual and textual representations together. By situating both forms within their specific historical and ideological contexts, the study reveals how different media participate in constructing, stabilizing, or destabilizing ideals of womanhood.

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework drawing upon gender studies, deconstruction, and queer theory to examine representations of epic womanhood across visual and textual media.

Gender studies provide the foundational lens through which ideals of femininity embedded in mythological narratives are analyzed. Concepts such as chastity, sacrifice, obedience, and endurance are treated not as natural attributes but as culturally produced ideals that serve specific social and ideological functions. These ideals regulate female behavior by framing suffering as moral achievement.

Deconstruction enables a critical interrogation of binary structures that underpin traditional epic narratives: purity versus impurity, silence versus speech, devotion versus defiance. By exposing the instability of these binaries, deconstructive reading practices reveal how the concept of "ideal womanhood" relies on suppressing contradiction, desire, and dissent.

Queer theory further extends this critique by challenging normative frameworks of gender and affect. Applied to contemporary retellings, queer theory allows emotions such as anger, longing, and ambivalence to be read as legitimate forms of resistance. It unsettles heteronormative and patriarchal expectations that confine women to roles of passive virtue.

Together, these theoretical approaches facilitate a nuanced reading of mythology as a dynamic discourse rather than a static moral archive. They allow the study to trace how representations of Sita and Draupadi function simultaneously as instruments of cultural regulation and as sites of potential subversion.

Visual culture has played a decisive role in shaping popular perceptions of mythological figures in India. Long before access to written texts became widespread, visual representations through temple sculpture, manuscript illustrations, theatre backdrops, and later printed images served as powerful modes of narrative transmission. In the nineteenth century, with the advent of print technology and the emergence of a pan-Indian middle-class public, mythological imagery

acquired unprecedented reach and authority. Within this visual economy, representations of female figures such as Sita and Draupadi became central to the articulation of gendered moral ideals.

Mythological painting in colonial India functioned not merely as aesthetic production but as a cultural project deeply implicated in questions of nationalism, identity, and morality. Female bodies, in particular, were mobilized as symbolic sites through which ideas of cultural purity and ethical continuity were expressed. As a result, visual depictions of epic women often prioritized idealization over interiority, transforming complex narrative figures into stable moral icons.

This section examines how such processes operate within selected mythological paintings, focusing on how visual form constructs femininity as disciplined, restrained, and morally exemplary. Raja Ravi Varma occupies a pivotal position in the history of Indian art due to his synthesis of European academic realism with Indian mythological subject matter. His paintings of epic scenes became foundational in shaping how generations of viewers visualized Hindu mythology. By adopting perspectival depth, anatomical realism, and naturalistic facial expressions, Varma endowed mythological figures with an immediacy that appeared both modern and authoritative.

At the same time, his representations were deeply influenced by nineteenth-century patriarchal and nationalist ideologies. Womanhood in Varma's paintings is constructed through a visual grammar of grace, modesty, and emotional containment. Female figures are often solitary or marginal within larger narrative compositions, their expressions subdued, their gestures restrained. Such aesthetic choices communicate moral virtue through visual discipline.

In *Sita in Ashoka Grove*, Varma depicts Sita during her captivity in Lanka, a moment of intense psychological trauma within the Ramayana. Yet the painting renders this trauma through serene beauty rather than visible distress. Sita is seated amidst lush vegetation, her body gently inclined, her expression introspective rather than anguished. The surrounding natural environment appears harmonious, almost protective, softening the brutality of her abduction.

The visual language of the painting transforms suffering into aesthetic contemplation. Sita's virtue is communicated through her composure and silence. There is no gesture of resistance, no outward sign of rage or despair. The ideal woman described here is one who shows moral strength by enduring suffering with dignity and self-control.

Such representation aligns with patriarchal interpretations of the Ramayana that frame Sita's ordeal as a test of chastity rather than a violation of autonomy. The painting thus participates in a broader cultural project of normalizing female suffering as an ethical necessity. By aestheticizing captivity, the artwork effaces the power dynamics of violence and replaces them with visual harmony.

In *Draupadi at the Court of Virat*, Draupadi is depicted during the Pandavas' period of exile in concealment. Rather than illustrating the infamous disrobing episode, Varma chooses a quieter, domesticated moment. Draupadi appears composed, modestly dressed, her posture controlled and gaze lowered. The visual narrative emphasizes containment rather than confrontation.

This representational choice is significant. Draupadi's most radical moment in the epic her public question of dharma during her humiliation is excluded in favor of an image that reinforces order and decorum. By omitting female anger and moral challenge, the painting reshapes Draupadi into a symbol of patience rather than protest.

Varma's Draupadi thus conforms to the same visual economy as Sita: feminine virtue is encoded through silence, bodily modesty, and emotional restraint. The political and ethical force of Draupadi's resistance is neutralized, transformed into a reassuring image of womanly endurance.

The ideological stakes of Varma's representations become clearer when situated within their historical context. Nineteenth-century Indian nationalism often positioned women as embodiments of cultural authenticity. While men engaged the public sphere of political resistance and reform, women were idealized as custodians of tradition and moral purity. Mythological imagery reinforced this division by holding up epic heroines as models of ideal femininity. Visual art played a critical role in naturalizing this ideology. By repeatedly circulating images of calm, beautiful, self-sacrificing women, mythological paintings contributed to the formation of a visual canon that equated virtue with submission. These representations discouraged alternative readings of female strength rooted in dissent or autonomy.

Importantly, the authority of visual representation lies in its immediacy. Unlike textual narratives, images do not demand interpretive labor; they present meaning as self-evident. As a result, Varma's paintings wielded immense cultural power, shaping not only aesthetic taste but moral perception.

Thus, while Varma's work represents a monumental achievement in Indian art history, it also exemplifies how visual culture can participate in the ideological containment of women. The mythological heroine becomes an icon revered but immobilized, admired but voiceless.

A crucial limitation of visual myth-making lies in its tendency toward fixity. Once codified, visual images resist narrative reinterpretation. Sita and Draupadi, when rendered as icons, become static embodiments of virtue rather than evolving subjects. Their interior lives the doubts, anger, desires, and ethical uncertainties that animate the epics are suppressed in favor of visual coherence. This is not merely an aesthetic issue but an ideological one. Fixity stabilizes meaning, foreclosing alternative interpretations. In doing so, visual icons sustain patriarchal norms by presenting gender roles as timeless and natural.

It is precisely this fixity that contemporary feminist retellings seek to disrupt. Where visual art monumentalizes virtue, narrative fiction reintroduces temporality, contradiction, and ethical struggle. The next section of this paper turns to contemporary literary reinterpretations that reclaim epic women as speaking subjects rather than visual ideals.

If nineteenth-century mythological painting stabilized ideals of womanhood through visual containment, contemporary feminist fiction reopens mythology by restoring narrative voice and interiority to its female figures. Modern retellings challenge the assumption that epic heroines are defined primarily by moral endurance. Instead, they foreground psychological

complexity, ethical conflict, and self-reflection, shifting the focus from exemplary virtue to lived experience.

Among the most influential contemporary rewritings are Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* and *The Palace of Illusions*. These novels deliberately reframe epic narratives by granting Sita and Draupadi first-person narrative authority. In doing so, Divakaruni moves mythology away from reverential distance and into intimate proximity, making the heroines narrators rather than objects of narration.

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni reconstructs the Ramayana through Sita's subjective consciousness. The novel does not deny Sita's moral strength but refuses to equate virtue with silence. By narrating her own story, Sita acquires interpretive authority over events that traditionally define her as a passive sufferer. Divakaruni writes, "I was no goddess, only a woman trying to navigate a world that didn't make space for me" (4). This sentence clearly shows the main feminist idea in her retelling. She rejects the usual way epic heroines are seen as perfect or divine and instead focuses on Sita's real human experience. By saying she is "no goddess," Divakaruni highlights how Sita is just a woman facing limits set by society, family, and politics, which often ignore women's choices and power. The phrase "no goddess" breaks the habit of making women's suffering seem holy or special. The part about "trying to find my place" reveals the sexist system that makes women feel like they don't belong in their own stories. By showing both weakness and strength, Divakaruni changes the myth into a way to question the idea that being feminine means always suffering quietly.

Divakaruni's Sita questions the patriarchal logic that frames trial, exile, and abandonment as necessary moral tests. Her pain is neither aestheticized nor glorified; it is rendered as psychological trauma accompanied by ethical questioning. The agnipariksha is no longer presented as divine validation but as a violation of dignity sanctioned by social expectation.

Through this narrative strategy, the novel deconstructs the binary between devotion and resistance. Sita remains committed to ethical principles, yet her refusal to return to Ayodhya at the novel's conclusion asserts personal autonomy. Rather than dissolving into mythic transcendence, her final withdrawal becomes an act of choice a refusal to participate further in a world that measures female worth through endurance.

From a gender-studies perspective, this reinterpretation disrupts the idealization of suffering. Feminine virtue is rearticulated as self-respect rather than sacrifice. The narrative thus reclaims morality as an ethical practice negotiated by individuals, not imposed through patriarchal ritual.

While Sita has often been idealized for her restraint, Draupadi has historically unsettled patriarchal norms through her outspoken defiance. Yet traditional tellings frequently discipline this defiance by framing her anger as disruptive or excessive. *The Palace of Illusions* reverses this ideological gesture by treating Draupadi's desire and rage as ethically meaningful rather than morally suspect.

Divakaruni's Draupadi narrates her life from birth to the aftermath of the Kurukshetra war, reflecting on ambition, resentment, love, and regret. Her voice exposes the cost of being

instrumentalized within male-centered political conflicts. Marriage, polyandry, and exile are not romanticized but experienced as negotiations of power that restrict personal agency.

The infamous disrobing episode becomes central in articulating Draupadi's ethical stance. Unlike visual representations that avoid or soften this moment, the novel emphasizes its violence and humiliation. Draupadi's questioning of dharma "What did I do to deserve this?" is framed not as impropriety but as moral inquiry. Her refusal to accept injustice silently becomes a critique of a moral order that privileges male honor over female dignity.

Queer theory provides a productive lens here by refusing normative emotional hierarchies that privilege patience over anger. Draupadi's rage disrupts the expectation that virtuous femininity must be emotionally contained. Her ambition and desire unsettle heteropatriarchal scripts that position women as moral anchors rather than active participants in political history.

Taken together, Divakaruni's novels reveal mythology as a palimpsest rather than a stable archive. The transformation of Sita and Draupadi from icons into narrators exposes how traditional retellings rely on suppressing interiority to preserve moral clarity. Once women speak, mythic coherence is replaced by ethical complexity.

Through deconstruction, the binary opposition between "good woman" and "rebellious woman" collapses. Sita's gentleness coexists with refusal; Draupadi's anger coexists with moral clarity. These figures resist categorization, embodying what feminist theory identifies as relational and contingent subjectivity rather than fixed identity.

Importantly, Divakaruni does not negate mythology; she inhabits it critically. Her work demonstrates that myth-making can be an act of feminist engagement rather than rejection. By rewriting from within the tradition, the novels reveal its fractures, contradictions, and unacknowledged violences.

The contrast between mythological painting and feminist fiction reveals how medium determines the possibilities of representation. Visual art, particularly within nationalist aesthetics, tends toward closure producing images that stabilize meaning. Literary narrative, by contrast, resists closure through temporal movement, ambiguity, and contradiction.

Raja Ravi Varma's paintings present Sita and Draupadi as idealized embodiments of virtue, their suffering translated into aesthetic harmony. Their silence confirms moral legibility. Divakaruni's novels, however, disrupt this legibility by foregrounding psychological struggle and ethical refusal. Voice becomes resistance.

Historically, these differences reflect shifts in cultural consciousness. Varma's work aligns with colonial-era concerns about preserving cultural identity through moral femininity. Divakaruni's fiction responds to contemporary feminist debates about agency, trauma, and selfhood. Both participate in myth-making, yet their ideological investments diverge sharply.

This comparative study underscores that myths function as ideological texts that regulate social behavior. When women are cast as moral exemplars, their suffering is normalized, and dissent is delegitimized. Feminist retellings reclaim myth as a space for ethical interrogation rather than moral certainty.

By questioning who speaks and who is seen, this paper demonstrates that feminine identity within mythology is neither unified nor timeless. It is shaped by historical context, representational form, and power relations. Sita and Draupadi emerge not as fixed archetypes but as dynamic figures whose meanings shift across retellings.

This paper has examined visual and textual reinterpretations of Sita and Draupadi to argue that representations of epic womanhood within Hindu mythology are inherently plural and contested. Nineteenth-century mythological paintings aestheticize feminine virtue through silence and restraint, reinforcing patriarchal ideals even as they elevate women symbolically. Contemporary feminist fiction, by contrast, reclaims voice, interiority, and ethical complexity, transforming epic heroines into speaking subjects.

The study showed, using ideas from gender studies, deconstruction, and queer theory, that creating myths is a continuous cultural process influenced by history and art. The way womanhood is shown in paintings and writing proves that mythology is still important not as a fixed tradition, but as an active conversation that can be questioned, changed, and reshaped.

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