

GENDER POWER DYNAMICS IN INDIAN MYTHOLOGY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SELECT GRAPHIC NARRATIVES THROUGH THE LENS OF SUSAN LANCER'S FEMINIST NARRATOLOGY

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Abstract

Investigating the analysis of the power difference between male and female characters represented in Indian mythology is important in understanding the broader ramifications of gender representation in modern tales. The analysis of Indian mythology is mostly critiqued and focussed on the patriarchal model in which male characters hold the positions of power while female characters hold some degree of subservience. The paper will examine how select graphic narratives reconfigure the power relations, subverting or reinforcing the gender roles through the lens of Susan Lancer's Feminist Narratology. The significance of these retellings, highlighted as 'feminist retellings', open up a site for some new means to revisit traditional stories, myths and ideologies to question and critically examine the nature and force of patriarchal injunctions (Bhat, 2021). The paper discusses specific examples of graphic narratives depicting female characters from Indian mythology, particularly Sita and Draupadi. From the grounded reading of the select texts, the paper aims to examine the representations that are usually interpreted to negotiate and articulate power dynamics and reflect values in contemporary society. This analysis will examine the power dynamics built through these characters and how they are re-shown in present-day retellings.

Key words: power, gender, mythology, graphic narratives, Sita, Draupadi

1. Introduction to Power Dynamics in Indian Mythology

Indian mythology comprises some of the most enriching traditions of storytelling that explore the deeply enmeshed philosophical, cultural, and sociopolitical frameworks of the subcontinent. Being mythic narratives, they consider the cosmological labours of creation and destruction, while also engaging with, through the struggles of humanity, confronting dharma (duty), karma (action), and the singular concept of artha (purpose). According to Yakkaldevi, "The ancient epic maintains its status as a culturally foundational text which, apart from philosophical/spiritual values, educational and religious instruction, contains and perpetuates ideas and ideals of ethical obligation (dharma), social norms and gender roles" (2014). Through mythological narratives, such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Puranas*, and so many others, the nature of human and divine relationships and their fundamental existence is considered. It is in the power relationships across mythic narratives where destinies are fulfilled, choices are made, and hierarchies of power, obedience, and resistance are determined (Sanil, 2016). According to Simone De Beauvoir,

At first thought, mythology seems an inhospitable terrain for a woman writer. There we find the conquering gods and heroes, the deities of pure thought and spirituality

so superior to mother nature; there we find the sexually wicked Venus, Circe, Pandora, Helen, Medea, Eve, and the victoriously passive Iphigenia, Alcestis, Mary, Cinderella. It is thanks to the myth we believe a woman must be either an angel or monster (1993).

First and foremost, power in Indian mythology is dynamic, highly negotiated, cancelling the notion that power is either finite, singular, or tied simply to an individual or event. Power is not static or rigid and can simultaneously be negotiated in the following aspects of lineage, caste, gender, zone of divinity, and moral standing within these mythological narratives. Power, or the process of negotiating power, may be explicit - a battle, a curse, a command or request, or an inquiry into what to do. Power may also be explicit - silence, exile, emotional, including trauma. Equally important, gendered vulnerabilities and dimensions of power become evident as the character's explained placement within a sociocultural system- who gets to speak, be heard, attempt a feat, become a figure of importance or act transgressively at costs previously determined in social structures. As such, the entanglement of describing cultural narratives intersecting cultural practice will provide critical readings into the ideological functions of mythological narratives over time and multigenerational. The interpretation of gender roles depicted in Indian mythology tended to reflect the patriarchal structures of ancient societies. According to Shail Kumari and Zeeshan Ali,

Myths remain a powerhouse of cultural and spiritual wisdom, especially within Indian traditions, which are far-famed for their detailed narrations, complex story plotting, and myriad characters. However, over time, these stories have been shaped and reshaped through the lens of patriarchal narrations, minimizing or deleting the agency of women in them (2025).

As per the common analysis, men are usually depicted as warriors, kings, sages, and incarnations of God; they serve as active agents of change and control. It is men who lead battles, perform rituals, act to uphold dharma, and carry the narrative weight. Male deities such as Vishnu, Shiva, and Indra act as the decision-makers and are the ones who protect; they represent stability and order in the universe and uphold cosmic balance. Women have been eulogised for the gender associated virtues such as chastity, loyalty, obedience, and self-sacrifice. Female characters, such as Sita in the *Ramayana* and Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*, are often central characters in the story, but they are mostly analysed as not always in charge of the narrative of their lives. Sita is often seen as the ideal self-effacing wife who accepts exile and public humiliation in order to provide her husband with honour. Draupadi, who presents as outspoken and intellectually clever, is gambled away by her husbands and shamed in public. Sasikala and G. Bhuvaneswari state,

According to these epics women are exclusively thought to be the personification of love, sex, and happiness. Women were supposed to be passive and patient. The Women characters in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* like Sita and Draupadi are adored as goddesses because of their patience, submissiveness, and subservience, Whereas women like Surpanaka are portrayed as witches because of their rebellious nature. Almost all the popular women characters in Hindu mythology are neither rulers nor rebels. The women who passively accepted the social norms set by the men are accepted as angels and Gods. Sita in *Ramayana*

according to the women revisionists, jumped into the fire not just to prove her chastity but to prove that she is a devoted wife of Rama. It is not only Sita but all the five iconic women in the Indian epics referred to together as Pancha Kanya who are celebrated as ideal women because of their subservience (2022, p.65).

Within these established paradigms, women are often framed as exemplars of virtue, loyalty, and sacrifice. For instance, Sita from the *Ramayana* shows a primacy of *pativrata dharma* (the ideal of a devoted wife) and her identity is situated with her connection to Rama. Her ordeal, which includes the fire test and her abandonment, emphasizes how patriarchal ideas drive her destiny, despite her moral value or agency. Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* shows that women's agency is limited regardless of how outspoken and bold a woman may be, as she is put through humiliation and base objectification, even as she resists assumptions made about her. In myths, conventional gender roles generally endorse some version of the assumption that men possess power be it physical, spiritual, or social while women's obligations include maintaining family honour, virtue, or duty. Divine feminine figures such as Lakshmi, Parvati, or Sita are draped in feminine roles intended to support their male counterparts, thus celebrating balance and order through male power and female submission and obligation (Gamberi, 2014). Nonetheless, the same texts also provide elements of resistance and empowerment of women, in which women interrogate imposed boundaries.

Thus, exploring power dynamics in mythology is necessarily the first step in addressing character relations and how authority, autonomy, and morality are divided between genders as indicators of a system's endorsement of normative behaviours. Power dynamics ultimately clarify the competing commitments between observations of submission and of resistance, of roles assigned and of desires cultivated and performed, all with a particular focus on women's experiences (Kit, 2014). We gain access to ideal gender ideologies of ancient India and reveal the relevance of past actions for today by examining how power is asserted, resisted, or negotiated in mythology. In addition, this type of analysis creates a basis for a revisionist approach to mythological texts through a feminist lens, which counters the readings that can be taken as erasing women's voices and experiences. In contemporary feminist retellings, those power structures inherent in myth are explored, elevated, and reinterpreted to show women not as passive figures, but as fully realized and functioning agents of their own embodied, passionate power.

2. Analysis of Male Characters in Graphic Narratives

In graphic novels, male characters frequently are presented through different avenues of masculinity, further perpetuating and/or resisting patriarchal forms of masculinity. This signal is important for defining an audience's perceptions of gendered behaviour and the way we view social hierarchies of authority from the narrative. Male characters generally embody characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, that is- domination, aggression, and emotional restraint. This aligns with the social expectations of masculinity that indicate "for boys' violence and domination are gender and masculinity norms" (Dagirmanjian, 2016). In many graphic narratives, male characters are presented as authoritative figures who are able to exert control over their surroundings and the people in them. Authority is often represented through

brute strength, cognitive strategy, or socio-economic capital. For example, Rama from the Ramayana adaptations often embodies the ideal masculine hero. Rama personifies ideal masculine behaviour marked by courage and leadership, while being ennobled through patriarchal ideology. Such representation forces a traditional definition of masculinity as inherently tied to power and control.

Nevertheless, today's graphic narratives show male characters who reject these standards. Men can be vulnerable, emotionally expressive, and subversion of the status quo. This development is significant because it acknowledges changes in how society views masculinity and provides a more varied view of male identity. For example, in *Sita's Ramayana*, male characters face more complicated dilemmas dealing with their responsibilities in a patriarchal environment. This complex representation provides the reader opportunities to critique static definitions of masculinity and to contemplate how emotionally and psychologically challenging it may be to perform masculinity .

3. The Role of Male Characters in Reinforcing or Challenging Patriarchal Norms

Male protagonists in graphic narratives often reinforce or resist patriarchal systems. In many conventional narratives, male protagonists are often established as the action hero and by contrast, female protagonists as peripheral characters. This paradigm reinforces the notion of males as heroes or decision-makers, while females remain passive recipients of their actions. These representations further entrench harmful stereotypes of female passivity and strengthen patriarchal systems of power. In contrast, some graphic narratives actively resist these systems by depicting male protagonists who recognize their privilege and challenge it. They may ally themselves with the female protagonists, protect their autonomy, and critique the societal expectations placed on them. In moments where male protagonists walk alongside female protagonists with care and kindness, the absolute notion of power breaks down, providing for a more equitable representation of gender relations.

It can be clearly viewed that in *The Ramayana*, for the sake of a husband's suspicion, a woman has to go to exile, bound to give birth and brought up her sons all alone and even after that inspection just to proof her purity she needs another man to defend her. Likewise in the second epic *The Mahabharata*, it is full of the exploitation of women's identity and independence where a woman is forced to be shared by five brothers, being exchanged on the gamble house of the royal court (Singh, 2017).

Furthermore, the changing representation of male characters in graphic novels is often indicative of societal changes regarding masculinity. As conversations around toxic masculinity and gender equity become front-and-centre issues, graphic narratives are beginning to respond to these changes, through male characters who display more emotional awareness and a sense of social responsibility for their actions. This evolution is important, in that it both enhances the appeal of graphic narratives, while providing readers with different options of masculinity that emphasize parity and dignity. Ultimately, the investigation of male characters in graphic narratives provide a quantitative measure of a tension between conventional depictions of masculinity, and present-day critiques of patriarchal practices. By

considering these complexities, we can begin to understand the ways in which graphic narratives are reactive and influential in the ongoing social dialogue surrounding gender roles and representation.

4. Analysis of Female Characters in Graphic Narratives

The depiction of female characters in graphic narratives has changed dramatically, demonstrating the overall change in society regarding gender roles and expectations. "The hyperreal world of gendered bodies in graphic narratives and the fictional world reaffirm the stereotypical gender boundaries" (Mathai and Das, 2023). Previously, female characters were often represented as passive characters whose primary role was to appear as love interests, or to support male characters. Such depictions reinforced standards of gender stereotypes regarding women's dependent and submissive nature. However, current graphic narratives increasingly depict female characters that possess agency, strength, and empowerment, contrasting and undermining the previous concepts. Prior to the current moment, female characters in graphic narratives were placed into the narrative role of the "damsel in distress," which valued the female's vulnerability and dependence on the male hero. The depiction of female characters further reinforced the idea that women were incapable of acting on their own behalf. It has been argued that, "female characters are most often portrayed as passive, submissive, and in need of rescue from the male characters" (Rane, 2022).

Contemporary graphic narratives exhibit a shift toward more empowered portrayals of female figures. Women are represented as active participants in their own stories rather than passive mediators of events. For example, in *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*, Sita is not solely depicted as a passive female, but as a strong and intricate character who endures situational difficulties with strength and resilience. The narrative shows her journey of self-discovery and empowerment by indicating she "challenges traditional patriarchal values." This demonstrates the advances made in the representation of female figures, as well as acknowledgement of female agency, and an intention to provide credence to female characters as dynamic human beings with desires and ambitions. Alongside the graphic narrative, *Sita's Ramayana* exhibits another representation of women's agency, where women are at the forefront of rejecting patriarchal standards. Sita is portrayed as an individual who not only withstands suffering but asserts her own strength and independence. Hence the story of Sita is not simply a plight of suffering, but rather a story of resistance and empowerment. This enables readers to identify with female figure characters that are sustained in strength, sturdy intellect, and emotional construct that generally forwards the idea since historically female figures' narratives have ignored or denied women an agency.

4.1 The Evolution of Female Characters from Passive to Active Roles

The shift in female characters from passive participants to active engagements is a notable trend in contemporary narratives. The transition to active characters is a direct response to society's changing outlooks and interest in feminist representations of women in the stories we read. As more graphic narratives include feminist topics in their stories, female characters are now depicted as protagonists where the narrative is driven not only by their experiences, but in ways that reflect fragile autonomy. Female characters in older texts were without agency in

their stories, where narratives revolved around their experiences with male characters. Those stories perpetuated fixed stereotypes that assigned women to perform traditional roles. In modern graphic narratives, those stereotypical truths are challenged and women are depicted as characters that forge their destiny. The character of Sita, in the book, *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*, displays this transition as we follow her journey from a passive character towards independence, rejection of typical qualities of society gendering women, and an active character. Here, Sita's character has been interpreted in various ways i.e. from goddess to woman, from woman to femininity, and from femininity to feminist.

Sita is evolved out of man's interpretations and later reinterpreted in the retellings of the Ramayana. Sita's character remained in the comfort zone of their writings and depended on the socio- cultural hegemonic status. Sita is always born according to men's writings and her reinterpretations in the Indian myths and epics. Men always portrayed Sita as perfect female time and again to suit them accordingly and complement them (Dawesar, 2003).

Moreover, the representation of women in graphic narratives is often framed within categories of solidarity and empowerment. Women often draw strength from female relationships during their challenges. The focus on female solidarity is important for reshaping stereotypical narratives to more complex representations of women experiences. In conclusion, the shift from passive to active female characters in graphic narratives marks an important cultural shift in women's affirmation and agency. By representing female characters as complex individuals rather than limited subjects of stereotype, graphic narratives carry the themes of gender representation and empowerment in public discourse.

5. Analyzing Power Dynamics in Graphic Narratives through Lanser's Feminist Narratology

In Lanser's feminist narratology, the narrative voice and perspective matter significantly as a way to represent characters, especially woman characters. To use Lanser's framework, we could analyze and consider how the narrative voice and perspective structure the representation of Sita and her agency. Lanser says, the narrative voice is an important part of the identity construction. According to her, "For the condition of being woman in a male-dominant society may well necessitate the double voice, whether as conscious subterfuge or as tragic dispossession of the self" (1986). Thinking about narrative voice and perspective offers a deeper understanding of how Sita's character is presented in these graphic narratives. Susan lanser concludes, "In the light of this reading, women's language becomes not simply a vehicle for constructing a more legitimate (masculine, powerful) voice but the voice through which the more global judgment of patriarchal practices is exercised" (p.350).

In *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*, Sita is presented acceptably not as a passive character but as an active character who reacts to her circumstance. The text depicts her as a "strong character who speaks up for herself", which is in direct contrast to many conventional depictions that focus on submission. This reinvention makes sense in light of Lanser's statement that feminist narratology wants to find out the distances to which narratives either 'empower or disempower' characters. She states,

Beneath the 'feminine' voice of self-effacement and emotionality, then, lies the 'masculine' voice of authority that the writer cannot inscribe openly. The subtext also exposes the surface text, and hence the surface voice, as a subterfuge, revealing the 'feminine style' to be a caricature donned to mask a surer voice in the process of communicating to a woman under the watchful eyes of a man (1986).

Similarly, in *Sita's Ramayana*, Sita's account has used a framework that accommodates the traditional view of struggle against oppression from masculine others. To retrieve Sita's story from the personification of victimization situates her as an active participant in her own story. Both accounts also align with Lanser's view that narratives can provide 'a space of resistance against dominant ideologies. She underscores, "*In a universe where waiting, inaction, reception, predominate, and action is only minimally possible, the narrative act itself becomes the source of possibility*" (1986). She further reiterates that women's voices have been confined to the private space and public space was predominantly seen as male space. She states, "Traditionally speaking, the sanctions against women's writing have taken the form not of prohibitions to write at all but of prohibitions to write for a public audience"(p.352). Hence texts like *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* reclaim that **public narrative space** for women and **challenge the tradition** of male narrators dominating mythic storytelling.

The power dynamics in these narratives are complex and multifaceted. In *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*, the graphic narrative addresses Sita's relationship with the world--especially with other characters--and how she often does not have agency because of standardization and social expectations. The text supports this and points out that Sita's character has been represented in a number of ways and how power is negotiated in the narrative. It matters because we are trying to understand how female configurations can work both with and against patriarchy. Whereas *Sita's Ramayana* allows Sita to find her relationship with other women, this is significant in how female relationships and configurations can empower. The text tells us that Sita draws strength from female relationships, which is something unique and important in terms of feminist narratology, as identified by Lanser. Although Sita and other female characters may work under patriarchal limitations, here, sisterhood as a mutual support system makes the relationship empowering. This stands in contrast to continuing notions that women 'compete for the attention of men' and normalizes a practice of empowerment through sisterhood and on productive, non-competitive, and supportive relationship patterns.

In *Draupadi: The Fire-Born Princess*, the graphic narrative pays particular attention to Draupadi's connection to the other characters. The graphic narrative illustrates the limits on Draupadi's agency based on the expectations of the social norms surrounding her. The text notes, Draupadi is a figure who has been interpreted in a number of ways, and this observation resonates with the ongoing negotiation of power that occurs in the narratives. This negotiation is central to understanding how female characters can inhabit and negotiate their femaleness in ways that conform to and go against the patriarchal paradigm. *Sita's Ramayana* focuses on how Sita aligns herself with the other women and reinforces how relationships between women can give her agency. The graphic narrative demonstrates that Sita draws her strength from relationships with other women, which is an important aspect of feminist narratology that

Lanser mentions. Lanser's analysis of a coded letter lays emphasis on a woman's relationship with the other women which becomes the cite of strength and resistance,

*Written for two readers (the prying husband and the intimate friend) this letter is in an unusually obvious sense a double construction, a blatant specimen of writing over and under censorship...*The plot of sharing an experience so that the listener's life may complete the speaker's tale. The letter thus suggests a plot behind women's 'plotless' narrative, the subversive plot of sharing an experience so that the listener's life may complete the speaker's tale (1986).

She also cites examples from other women's writings,

...in novel after novel Jane Austen constitutes a narrative voice that cannot be pinned down ... In Susan Glaspell's 'A Jury of Her Peers' two women protect a third from a conviction for murder by communicating in 'women's language' under the watchful but unseeing eyes of the Law (1986).

The emphasis on sisterhood and support provides a counter-narrative to the idea that women are competing for the attention of men and offers a way of envisioning women's empowerment through support.

Examining power through Lanser's framework indicates how graphic narratives help change readers' perceptions of women characters, which deepens understanding of their agency and the institutional circumstances governing them. Draupadi's and Sita's narratives offer excellent examples of how graphic narratives can interrogate patriarchal structures as well as grant articulation to women's voices. Together, they serve as a valuable contribution to the discourse on gender's representation in literature.

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