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**Dissenting Epics on Stage: Gender, Power, and Resistance in  
Devdutt Pattanaik's Retellings**

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**Abstract**

Contemporary reinterpretations of Indian epics increasingly function as **performative sites of dissent**, challenging hegemonic readings of myth, gender, and authority that have long shaped cultural consciousness. Rather than treating the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* as fixed, sacrosanct texts, modern retellings approach them as dynamic narrative traditions open to ethical questioning and reinterpretation. In this context, the mythological writings of Devdutt Pattanaik offer a particularly fertile framework for theatrical and performative reimagining. His retellings foreground narrative plurality, ethical ambiguity, and marginal voices, thereby resisting monolithic interpretations of epic morality.

Drawing on feminist theory, subaltern studies, and cultural studies, this article examines how Pattanaik's mythological interventions destabilise patriarchal power structures embedded within epic narratives. Female figures such as Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, and Gandhari emerge not merely as symbols of suffering or virtue but as complex subjects whose experiences expose the gendered violence and moral contradictions of epic society. Simultaneously, Pattanaik's attention to marginal and peripheral figures challenges elite and royal-centric perspectives, aligning his work with subaltern attempts to recover silenced voices within dominant cultural traditions.

By reading Pattanaik's works through the lens of theatre and performance studies, the article argues that his retellings function as **scripts-in-potential**—open, interpretive texts that invite re-performance rather than faithful reproduction. These narratives enable counter-performances that foreground ethical conflict, bodily vulnerability, and ideological tension on the contemporary stage. Myth, in this framework, is not merely narrated but enacted as a performative discourse through which dissent is embodied, voiced, and negotiated. Such reinterpretations reaffirm the relevance of epic mythology in contemporary debates on gender, power, and resistance, transforming tradition into a living, critical practice.

**Keywords:** Indian epics, theatre studies, feminism, subaltern studies, performance, dissent

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### **Introduction: Epic, Performance, and Contemporary Dissent**

Indian epics have never existed solely as literary artefacts confined to manuscripts or canonical texts. From their earliest circulation, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* have functioned as living narratives, transmitted through oral storytelling, ritual enactment, dance, music, and theatrical performance. Traditions such as Ramlila in North India, Yakshagana in Karnataka, Kathakali in Kerala, and Koodiyattam within temple spaces exemplify how epic narratives have been continually embodied, visualised, and reinterpreted before diverse audiences. These performances have not only preserved the epics across centuries but have also played a crucial role in shaping popular understandings of gender roles, social hierarchy, authority, and moral conduct.

Yet, while epic performance has enabled continuity and communal participation, it has also often reinforced dominant ideological structures. The ritualised repetition of epic scenes—Sita's trial by fire, Draupadi's disrobing, Rama's exile, Karna's humiliation—has historically stabilised patriarchal norms and hierarchical power relations. Performative conventions frequently frame obedience, sacrifice, and silence as virtues, particularly for women, while glorifying masculine heroism, royal authority, and divine sanction. In this sense, epic theatre has functioned as a cultural pedagogy, transmitting normative values alongside sacred narratives.

In the contemporary moment, however, epic performance has increasingly become a site of questioning rather than affirmation. Modern retellings challenge inherited performative orthodoxies by unsettling familiar interpretations and foregrounding ethical contradictions within the epics. Among contemporary mythologists, Devdutt Pattanaik occupies a distinctive position. Although his works are primarily textual, they are deeply performative in orientation. His emphasis on symbolism, psychology, emotional truth, and narrative plurality resonates strongly with theatre and performance studies, which understand performance not as the reproduction of a fixed script but as an interpretive, embodied act shaped by context and perspective.

This article situates Pattanaik's retellings within contemporary performance discourse, arguing that they function as **scripts-in-potential**—open narrative frameworks that invite reinterpretation, re-staging, and dissent. By reading Pattanaik through feminist theory, subaltern studies, and cultural studies, the essay examines how his mythological interventions destabilise patriarchal authority, recover marginal voices, and reframe epic morality as ethically ambiguous. In doing so, the article demonstrates how Pattanaik's work enables dissenting stagings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, transforming epic performance into a space of critical engagement rather than reverential repetition.

#### **Theoretical Framework: Feminism, Subalternity, and Performance**

##### **Feminist Theory and Gendered Performance**

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Feminist theory provides a crucial framework for interrogating the gendered structures embedded within epic narratives and their performative traditions. Classical epic performance has historically scripted women into limited roles—devoted wife, suffering mother, patient queen—while denying them narrative agency or moral autonomy. Judith Butler's assertion that gender is performative rather than innate offers a powerful lens through which to examine these representations. Gender, according to Butler, is constituted through repeated acts that solidify into norms over time (Butler 25). In epic performance, these repetitions—Sita's endurance, Draupadi's humiliation, Gandhari's silence—produce and reinforce ideals of feminine virtue.

When these characters are repeatedly staged in ritualised forms, their suffering becomes naturalised, even sanctified. Pattanaik's retellings disrupt this performative repetition by shifting attention from idealised virtue to emotional conflict and ethical complexity. In *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, he reframes Sita not merely as an emblem of chastity but as a woman negotiating power, abandonment, and selfhood within a patriarchal order (47). Such reframing enables theatre practitioners to resist iconic representations and stage Sita as a questioning subject rather than a moral symbol.

Similarly, Draupadi's disrobing in the *Mahābhārata* has traditionally been staged as a moment of divine intervention that reaffirms cosmic justice. Pattanaik, however, foregrounds the human failure underlying the spectacle, exposing the complicity of male authority in her humiliation (*Jaya* 63). Feminist reinterpretation thus becomes a performative act of resistance, allowing the female body on stage to articulate dissent through silence, refusal, or embodied vulnerability.

#### **Subaltern Studies and Silenced Voices**

Subaltern studies further deepen this critique by focusing on voices excluded from dominant narratives of history and culture. Ranajit Guha's work highlights how elite historiography marginalises non-elite experiences, while Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously questions whether the subaltern can speak within hegemonic discourses. Epic literature, like history, privileges royal, divine, and heroic perspectives, often rendering marginal figures voiceless.

Pattanaik's retellings align closely with subaltern inquiry by foregrounding characters relegated to the margins of epic narrative. Figures such as Shabari, Ekalavya, Karna, and Gandhari are not treated as peripheral episodes but as ethical commentators whose experiences expose the injustices of epic society. Karna's repeated humiliation, for instance, is reframed as a structural consequence of caste hierarchy rather than personal failure (*Jaya* 72). Gandhari's silence is presented not as submission but as a tragic response to systemic exclusion.

In performance contexts, such reframing enables the centring of subaltern bodies on stage. Epic theatre, when informed by Pattanaik's perspectives, becomes a space of counter-

history where marginal voices articulate resistance not through overt rebellion but through exposure of injustice. This aligns with performance studies' emphasis on embodiment as a mode of knowledge production, allowing the subaltern to "speak" through gesture, presence, and silence.

### **Cultural Studies: Myth as Ideological Discourse**

Cultural studies approaches myth as an ideological construct rather than a sacred absolute. Stuart Hall's conception of culture as a site of meaning-making and contestation is particularly relevant here. Myths, from this perspective, do not simply reflect reality but actively shape social values, power relations, and identities (Hall 284).

Pattanaik explicitly adopts this stance, insisting that myths are shaped by fear and desire rather than divine command (*My Gita* 15). By rejecting the idea of a single, authoritative epic, he destabilises ideological closure and invites interpretive plurality. For theatre practitioners, this legitimises experimental, revisionist performances that challenge dominant readings of epic morality.

From a performance studies perspective, this transforms epic theatre into ideological critique. Performances informed by Pattanaik's work do not transmit fixed moral lessons but expose the cultural assumptions underlying those lessons. Theatre thus becomes a space where myth is negotiated, contested, and reimagined in response to contemporary ethical concerns.

### **Gender, Power, and the Performative Body**

In Pattanaik's reinterpretations, power is repeatedly shown to operate through control over bodies, particularly female bodies. Epic narratives often stage women's suffering as public spectacle—Sita's exile, Draupadi's disrobing, Ahalya's curse—transforming personal trauma into communal instruction. Pattanaik reframes these moments as ethical failures of patriarchal authority rather than tests of feminine virtue (*Jaya* 65).

For theatre practitioners, this reframing has profound implications. Performance studies emphasise the body as a primary site of meaning. When staged through Pattanaik's lens, the female body is no longer merely an object of spectacle but a locus of resistance. Silence, immobility, and refusal acquire political significance, compelling spectators to confront their own role as witnesses. Such performances disrupt the traditional pleasure of epic spectacle and replace it with ethical discomfort. The audience is no longer positioned as passive consumers of myth but as participants implicated in the dynamics of power and judgement enacted on stage.

### **Reinterpreting Dharma: Ethical Ambiguity on Stage**

Traditional epic performances often present dharma as fixed, universal, and unquestionable. Pattanaik, however, frames dharma as contextual and deeply entangled with power relations. Rama's abandonment of Sita and Krishna's political manoeuvres are not justified as divine necessity but examined as ethically ambiguous choices shaped by fear, desire, and social pressure (*Jaya* 19).

In theatrical terms, this ambiguity resists didactic performance. Actors portraying epic heroes are no longer required to embody moral certainty; instead, they perform doubt, hesitation, and contradiction. Such staging aligns with modern political theatre traditions that foreground ethical tension rather than moral resolution.

This approach encourages critical spectatorship, inviting audiences to reflect on the limits of authority and the complexity of ethical decision-making. Dharma, rather than functioning as a moral endpoint, becomes a question posed to both performer and spectator.

### **Resistance as Reperformance**

Resistance in Pattanaik's work is enacted not through rebellion but through reinterpretation. His retellings function as open scripts, inviting theatre-makers to experiment with narrative focus, character alignment, and staging conventions. This aligns with Richard Schechner's concept of "restored behaviour," where performances rework existing material to generate new meanings.

By enabling alternative stagings centred on marginal voices and feminist ethics, Pattanaik's works transform epic theatre into a space of cultural resistance. Myth, when reperformed critically, becomes a living discourse rather than a static inheritance.

### **Conclusion**

When read through feminist theory, subaltern studies, and cultural studies, Devdutt Pattanaik's retellings emerge as powerful resources for contemporary theatre and performance practice. By challenging patriarchal authority, centring marginal voices, and embracing ethical ambiguity, his works invite dissenting performances of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. These reinterpretations do not reject tradition but reanimate it, transforming epic mythology into a performative space where resistance is embodied, voiced, and staged. In doing so, Pattanaik's mythological interventions reaffirm the relevance of epic narratives in negotiating questions of gender, power, and justice in the modern world.

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