
**Reclaiming Voices in Modern Indian English Retellings of the Mahabharata:
The Poetics of Narrative Justice**

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Abstract:

Contemporary Indian English retellings of the Mahabharata challenge traditional narratives by bringing marginalized characters and perspectives to the forefront, using the epic as a framework to address modern social concerns like gender and caste dynamics. These works engage in "narrative justice," actively reinterpreting the past to critique historical injustices and promote a more inclusive understanding of the epic's moral implications in the present day. The Mahabharata, a cornerstone of Indian civilization, has been continuously reinterpreted over centuries, yet its traditional narrative structure often reflects patriarchal and elitist values, which have historically sidelined the voices of women and other subordinated groups. In today's literary scene, Indian English writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anand Neelakantan, and Devdutt Pattanaik are engaging with this ancient epic to challenge long-standing power structures, moral frameworks, and ideas of authorship.

This paper explores the concept of narrative justice as both a theoretical and literary approach that these authors use to recover silenced perspectives and reshape the ethical dimensions of mythic storytelling. Within this context, narrative justice is understood as the act of restoring voice, dignity, and moral agency to characters who have traditionally been denied the right to be interpreted or understood. Drawing on feminist and subaltern theory, the paper closely examines Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Neelakantan's *Ajaya* series (2013–2015), and Pattanaik's *Jaya* (2010). It illustrates how Divakaruni's *Draupadi* becomes a figure of feminist resistance and epistemic authority, how Neelakantan's *Duryodhana* and *Karna* represent subaltern characters reclaiming historical justice, and how Pattanaik's use of multiple narrative perspectives enacts dialogic ethics that move beyond simplistic notions of good and evil. Collectively, these retellings challenge the established

structure of the Mahabharata by distributing narrative authority more widely and by redefining dharma as a flexible, ethical process rather than a rigid divine dictate.

Keywords: Feminist retelling, subalternity, Mahabharata, narrative justice, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anand Neelakantan, Devdutt Pattanaik,

Introduction:

The Mahabharata, one of the most foundational epics of Indian civilization, has always been a living document that has continuously absorbed, reinterpreted, and re-emerged across centuries through oral traditions, written texts, and performative expressions. Its rich moral complexities, classic characters, and deep philosophical meanings have allowed it to move beyond time and language, changing and evolving with every new telling. In the twenty-first century, this adaptability has taken new forms through English-language retellings by Indian authors who use the Mahabharata as a space for exploring and questioning the traditional hierarchies of gender, caste, and power. Within this creative revival, the idea of narrative justice defined as the ethical and artistic act of bringing back the voices of those who were silenced or misrepresented becomes essential in understanding how these writers reinterpret the Mahabharata for modern audiences.

The term "poetics of narrative justice" refers not only to the act of restoring these unseen voices but also to the larger structures and styles that allow these voices to express resistance and autonomy. In literary terms, "poetics" refers to the way a story is built how authors use techniques, viewpoints, and artistic methods to create meaning. When combined with "narrative justice," this term captures how the very act of storytelling becomes a form of ethical correction. The original version of the Mahabharata, written by Vyasa, often centers on duty over personal emotion, patriarchy over female independence, and divine authority over human imperfection. Contemporary Indian English retellings, such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya* series (2013–2015), and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010), aim to challenge this imbalance by changing the narrative angles, reviving interior perspectives, and reinterpreting moral conflict through modern values. This resurgence of mythological storytelling reflects what scholars such as Meenakshi Mukherjee (2012) and G.N. Devy (2017) refer to as "the democratization of mythology" a process where characters previously seen as divine or heroic are made relatable and human, and those historically marginalized, such as social outcasts or women, are given a place to speak and act within the story. These authors don't just rewrite the story; they also rebuild its moral structure,

suggesting that the pursuit of dharma, central to the epic's moral framework, can no longer be separated from themes of equality and justice. Each author's unique contribution reveals a clear ideological stance: Divakaruni speaks with a feminist perspective, reimagining Draupadi's silence; Neelakantan presents himself as a chronicler of the subaltern, giving voice to the defeated Kauravas; and Pattanaik seeks to find balance between tradition and contemporary thought as a mythographer. From a feminist viewpoint, *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reclaims Draupadi's subjectivity from the male-dominated storytelling of the original Mahabharata. Instead of presenting Draupadi as a passive figure shaped by the actions of men, Divakaruni reshapes her narrative as a continuation of her own emotions, choices, and ethical awareness. By giving Draupadi a first-person perspective, the author performs an act of narrative justice transforming the epic's most marginalized woman into a storyteller who interprets her own destiny, rather than simply living it. This is a powerful intervention in the cultural memory of the Mahabharata, where Draupadi's voice used to be represented only through the perspectives of male narrators. On the other hand, Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya* series provides what might be called a form of subaltern narrative justice.

He offers a fresh perspective by telling the story from Duryodhana's point of view traditionally portrayed as the main villain. Through this alternative narrative, Neelakantan challenges the conventional understanding of dharma as defined by the Pandavas, the victors, and gives dignity and complexity to the defeated Kauravas. By reinterpreting figures like Karna, Ekalavya, and Ashwatthama, Neelakantan sheds light on the caste-based and elitist systems that were present in the original text. As a result, *Ajaya* becomes a text of resistance, offering a voice and narrative justice to those who lost not only the war but also their moral recognition in the epic's original account. In contrast, Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* adopts a more inclusive and syncretic approach. Instead of favoring a singular perspective, Pattanaik weaves together multiple regional and folk versions of the Mahabharata, restoring a sense of narrative inclusivity.

2. Statement of the study:

Traditional interpretations of the Mahabharata have marginalized the perspectives of peripheral characters, especially women and lower-caste individuals, leaving a gap in cultural understanding of the epic's moral and social implications. Modern retellings aim to correct this by centering these characters and challenging established power dynamics using a "poetics of narrative justice". The study has been selected to know the Poetics of Narrative Justice of Mahabharata in modern English literature.

3. Review of Literature:

The reinterpretation of mythological women through a feminist lens has emerged as a powerful literary movement in contemporary Indian fiction, marking a shift from divine

archetypes to psychologically complex individuals. In traditional epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, women such as Sita and Draupadi have historically functioned as moral exemplars shaped by patriarchal ideologies-Sita as the chaste, obedient consort, and Draupadi as the catalyst of war and dharma-bound queen. However, feminist scholars argue that these portrayals have marginalized the inner lives, desires, and emotional struggles of these iconic women. Writers such as Pratibha Ray, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Kavita Kane have responded to this gap by retelling the lives of Sita and Draupadi in ways that foreground their agency, emotional complexity, and narrative authority.

Ray's Yajnaseni (1995) portrays Draupadi as a deeply introspective figure who philosophically engages with her destiny and experiences, presenting herself not merely as a victim of fate but as a moral thinker who questions the silence of her husbands, the injustice of her public humiliation, and the rigidity of dharma

Pattanaik (2010) and Sharma (2001) have noted that Ray's use of an epistolary format enables Draupadi to reclaim her voice in a deeply spiritual and existential framework. **Sundararajan (2011)** highlight how this narrative form disrupts the epic's male-centric focus and positions Panchaali as a woman of desire and defiance. Her feelings for Karna, her intellectual exchanges with Krishna, and her perception of the war as both tragedy and necessity reflect a subjective consciousness absent in the traditional Mahabharata.

Kavita Kane's Sita's Sister (2014) adds to this corpus by giving narrative attention to Urmila, Sita's sister and Lakshmana's wife, who endures 14 years of solitude. As Sharma (2022) [26] argues, Kane humanizes the silent suffering of peripheral women in epics, showing how strength can reside in endurance, not just open rebellion. Together, these novels mark a literary trend that seeks to retrieve the emotional, psychological, and moral dimensions of mythological women, moving them from passive archetypes to active, thinking individuals.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) have raised concerns about the historical silencing of the subaltern woman; these novels can be seen as attempts to allow epic women to speak for themselves after centuries of interpretive domination by male perspectives.

Malhotra (2017) and Mukherjee (2015) suggest that these retellings represent a feminist mythopoesis-a rewriting of sacred narratives that foregrounds female experience as central to spiritual and cultural discourse.

4. Research Methodology:

The methodology would clearly define the scope of the study, specifically limiting the analysis to "modern Indian English retellings" to manage the vastness of the epic's adaptations. So the following research design is prepared.

4.a Objectives of the study:

Keeping in view the above importance of the study, the following objectives have been outlined.

1. To study the Poetics of Narrative Justice.
2. To analyses the Feminist Narrative Justice.
3. To study Mythographic Justice and Cultural Plurality.
4. To study Comparative Insights.

4.b, Hypothesis of the study:

The following hypothesis are framed for the present study.

- H1. Contemporary writers on purpose use certain literary methods.
- H2. The retelling's act as a form of feminist intervention, aiming to challenge the hidden gender biases present in the original text and to give more visibility to female characters.
- H3. This process, referred to as "mythographic justice," changes the way we see the epic, not as one fixed and official text, but as a place where many different cultural stories can be told.
- H4. The study suggests that by comparing traditional epic versions with modern retellings, it will clearly show how these new versions differ and what they reveal about gender and culture.

5. Discussions:

Theoretical Framework: The Poetics of Narrative Justice.

The idea of "narrative justice" has taken on a significant role in literary and cultural studies, focusing on how storytelling can serve as a means of ethical restoration. This concept acknowledges that literature is not simply a reflection of the real world, but rather a dynamic force that redistributes moral and representational visibility among voices that have been historically marginalized or suppressed by dominant ideologies. This concept stems from the ethical turn in literary theory that began in the latter part of the twentieth century, when scholars such as Martha Nussbaum (1990), Paul Ricoeur (1992), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) examined the connections between narrative, morality, and identity. When combined with the term "poetics," the phrase "poetics of narrative justice" refers not only to what justice is depicted in a narrative, but also to how the very structure of the literary work itself acts as a medium for moral reparation.

Defining Narrative Justice:

In a broader sense, narrative justice implies the redistribution of attention and empathy through the act of storytelling. According to Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, stories help to structure human experiences and provide a sense of continuity amid fragmented histories. However, when these narratives privilege certain perspectives such as royal, patriarchal, upper caste, or colonial then they reinforce injustice within the very fabric of culture. On the other hand, when these stories are retold from the perspectives of the voices that have been silenced, they can perform acts of symbolic justice. This is evident in Indian English retellings of the Mahabharata, which engage in what might be called "mythic justice"

correcting the imbalance between divine authority and human suffering. The Mahabharata, as a text, has always invited various interpretations. Its polyphonic nature, which embraces contradictory truths, makes it an ideal ground for exploring the ethics of retelling. Yet, as Wendy Doniger (2009) points out, the dominant versions of the epic have often silenced the voices of women, lower castes, and those who were defeated. Narrative justice seeks to counteract this silencing by enabling the voices of the marginalized to reinterpret mythic experiences from within. Therefore, the poetics of narrative justice involves three interconnected dimensions:

1. Voice: Who is embodying the story? Who is considered authorized to speak?
 2. Form: What stylistic methods such as first-person narration, interior monologue, or intertextual layering are used to create justice within the narrative?
 3. Ethics: How does storytelling itself become an act of resistance, recognition, or empathy?
- Together, these dimensions form the ethical framework of retelling—the art of speaking what has been unspeakable and listening to what has been unheard.

Feminist Literary Theory: Framework: To better understand Divakaruni's storytelling choices, it's important to look at them through the lens of feminist literary theory. Adrienne Rich talks about "re-vision" as the idea of looking back at a text with new eyes and approaching it from a different angle. Divakaruni's Draupadi does exactly this. She takes back her voice in a story where she was once seen only as an object. Feminist criticism focuses on how women's voices have been quieted or ignored, especially in classic stories. In Divakaruni's version, Draupadi is not just the reason for the big war; she becomes someone who tells her own story of pain, wants, and disappointments. Her inner thoughts change how the story is told, shifting it away from a male-centered view. She says, "I was born with an inward gaze. I've always looked for meanings beneath the surface of things." This idea of looking inward connects with feminist thinkers who believe that women's inner lives are a form of resistance. By letting Draupadi tell her own story, Divakaruni answers Gayatri Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" with a strong, mythic "yes." The novel doesn't just switch the roles of men and women; it questions the basic ideas of power, voice, and how history is remembered. It argues that women's stories are not just extra details they are key to understanding the history of culture.

Feminist Narrative Justice: Feminist theorists like Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, and Spivak have long argued that patriarchy functions through the control of narrative, by framing women's experiences from a male perspective.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* exemplifies this feminist revisionism by reimagining the Mahabharata through the inner voice of Draupadi. Her use of first-person narration reclaims narrative agency, transforming a traditionally silenced mythic figure into a deeply reflective consciousness. As Divakaruni's Draupadi proclaims,

"I was born of fire, and I have walked through fire all my life" (Divakaruni, 2008, This fiery self-awareness becomes both a metaphor for the endurance of women and a declaration of their intellectual independence. The feminist aspect of narrative justice, then, lies in the restoration of interiority the recognition of women's moral, emotional, and intellectual complexity. In Divakaruni's narrative approach, justice is not achieved through vengeance or divine intervention but through the act of storytelling itself the agency of a woman to tell her own story. By making Draupadi the narrator, the author subverts traditional patriarchal authorship and rewrites history from within the very mythic framework that once oppressed her. Furthermore, this feminist justice resists the simplistic binary of virtue and transgression that is often assigned to women in epics. Draupadi's desires such as love, recognition, and self-determination are portrayed not as moral failures, but as legitimate expressions of human authenticity. Through this lens, The Palace of Illusions enacts what Elaine Showalter (1991) describes as "the rewriting of the heroine's fate as an act of cultural survival."

Mahabharata in Modern Mythic Fiction Reception and Reconstruction:

Reception and Reconstruction of the Mahabharata in Modern Mythic Fiction refers to how the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata, has been interpreted, adapted, and reimagined in contemporary literary works that blend mythology with fiction. This process involves not only the preservation of the original narrative and cultural values of the Mahabharata but also its transformation to suit modern sensibilities, themes, and storytelling techniques. Authors and writers have drawn inspiration from the Mahabharata's rich characters, complex moral dilemmas, and profound philosophical ideas to create new stories that resonate with today's audiences. These modern retellings often incorporate elements of science fiction, fantasy, and psychological depth to explore the timeless themes of duty, righteousness, love, and war. The Mahabharata continues to serve as a foundational source for mythic fiction, where its archetypal figures and legendary events are reinterpreted to reflect current social, political, and existential concerns

The past has a vital role in shaping the present, as many old stories and myths continue to be shared today through various forms like tales, poems, TV serials, cartoon strips, advertisements, movies, and animated films. These forms serve as tools to better understand the needs and values of the present day. In a similar way, fictional reimagining's also help convey important messages and ideas. This paper explores how the Mahabharata, a major ancient Indian epic, has been passed down and interpreted in Indian English literature. The paper also examines how modern Indian English writers have reinterpreted the Mahabharata, helping to understand how the epic's complex structure relates to its reception today. The Mahabharata is no longer seen as a single, complete work created by one poet or a group at a particular time. It is now understood as a collection of many different traditions and stories that have been passed down over centuries, with each generation adding

their own interpretations and adaptations. This makes the Mahabharata a "inter-text" rather than a single text, which means it is shaped by many different versions and influences. Today, Indian readers often engage with English translations of the Mahabharata, and the way they do so is influenced by various media and interpretations, such as TV series, cartoons, songs, children's stories, and parables. These different forms contribute to how the Mahabharata is received and understood in contemporary society. Several key translations and retellings of the Mahabharata have contributed to its reception in Indian English. For example, Romesh C. Dutt published a condensed version of the Mahabharata in English between 1848 and 1909, selecting verses that focus on the main plot. Kisari Mohan Ganguli translated the entire Mahabharata into English between 1883 and 1896, and this is the only full-length edition available in the public domain. C. Rajagopalachari provided an abridged English version of the Mahabharata in 1951, written in simple language that covers the key aspects of the epic. More recently, Bibek Debroy has translated the entire Mahabharata into ten English volumes published between 2010 and 2014. Devdutt Pattanaik has also created an illustrated retelling of the Mahabharata, titled "Jaya," in which he explains that the book is another version of the epic, influenced by both Sanskrit classics and regional stories, and shaped by his own ideas and the expectations of modern readers. Other writers have taken new approaches in retelling the Mahabharata.

Trisha Das has written a novel titled "Ms Draupadi Kuru: After the Pandavas," offering a fresh perspective on Draupadi. Chindu Sreedharan has retold the story from Bhima's point of view using Twitter, condensing the epic into a format that is easy to follow. Anand Neelakantan's "Ajaya" tells the story from the perspective of the Kauravas, focusing on those who were neglected and wronged. These authors have changed the way readers understand the epic by shifting the focus from traditional viewpoints to contemporary ones. The Mahabharata itself is the result of many additions made over a long time, which is now widely accepted by scholars. The idea of finding a single, original version of the epic seems unrealistic because it has been changed and expanded by many different storytellers. It is believed that the original version was called "Jaya," which had about 8,800 verses. Over time, it was expanded to 24,000 verses and called "Bharata," and finally to 90,000 verses, known as the "Mahabharata." However, even in critical editions like BORI's, the number of verses is slightly less than 75,000. This shows that the Mahabharata is a living text that keeps evolving with different interpretations and additions.

All these novelists discovered specific elements within the epic that they wanted to highlight through their own works. The novel as a genre has its own way of looking at reality, which is different from the earlier forms of storytelling. The Mahabharata is a vast collection of stories and scenes; some of these are not directly connected to the main storyline, which

revolves around the conflict between the sons of Pandu and Dhritrashtra. These peripheral stories, too, have found a place in modern literary works written in regional languages as well as in Indian English, reshaping the way the central narrative is told and focused. Even within the epic itself, there are multiple narrators. It starts with Vyasa, who conceived the epic, and Ganesha, who wrote it down. Then there's Vaishampayana narrating it to Janmejaya, and later, Sage Ugrasravas and Saunak, and finally Sanjaya. Vyasa also appears as a character in various parts of the epic. The Mahabharata exists in a kind of alternate space that brings together different voices and perspectives.

The theme of realism is central to all three novels. The focus of each novelist is on the inner lives of the main characters: Draupadi, Bhima, and Duryodhana. In Trisha Das's **Ms Draupadi Kuru**, Draupadi is portrayed as someone who is tired of heaven and decides to come back to Earth, specifically to Indraprastha, which is now modern-day Delhi, with Krishna's permission. As the story progresses, she chooses to identify herself as "Ms Draupadi Kuru" because she realizes that married women are addressed as "Mrs.", unmarried ones as "Miss", but women who see themselves as independent go by "Ms". Here, the author emphasizes Draupadi's identity and individuality, not just as a wife or daughter. Traditional portrayals of Draupadi often tie her identity to her husbands or father, but in this novel, she is shown as an independent woman who makes her own choices. In *Epic Retold* by Chindu Sreedharan, Bhima is a central figure who openly expresses his views on the events of the entire epic. He is portrayed as the unifying force between the Pandavas and Kuravas, and the story shows that victory would not have been possible without his presence. The author also reimagines the birth of the Pandavas, revealing that they were not born through divine mantras but through natural human relations. Kunti tells Bhima the truth about his origins, explaining that he was actually the son of Dhritrashtra. This revelation also explains why Dhritrashtra feared Bhima, as he was the key to holding the Pandava brothers together.

In Anand Neelakantan's *Duryodhana*, the titular character is named "Suyodhana" and the story was inspired by a visit to the Malanada Temple in Poruvazhy village, Kerala, dedicated to Duryodhana. The narrative is built on the idea that Duryodhana was an honest, brave, and self-willed prince who was willing to fight for what he believed in. This is a radical departure from traditional portrayals of Duryodhana as a cunning and scheming ruler. The novel also highlights Prince Shakuni as the first invader and traitor, setting up the entire conflict. As a result, all the events of the epic are told from the perspective of these key characters, each with their own sense of anxiety and emotional turmoil. Other characters, like Jara, Amba, Gandhari, Shakuni, and Balam, also get space in the story through new interpretations or additions. While these writers have tried to stay true to the original Mahabharata, their retellings are not without their own unique perspectives. They have

transformed the dialogic nature of the epic into a more personal narrative. These novels are closely connected to the spirit of the original work, but it is also essential to understand the complex layers and intertextual relationships within the Mahabharata itself. The core message of the Mahabharata, rooted in our past, continues to influence our present understanding of the world. This historical narrative, still very much alive in our minds after over five thousand years, can only be truly revived through new and meaningful interpretations that connect us to it.

Mythographic Justice and Cultural Plurality

Devdutt Pattanaik's work stands out from the approaches of Divakaruni and Neelakantan in both style and method. In his book *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010), Pattanaik combines mythography, illustrations, and commentary to present myths not as fixed religious texts, but as open spaces for multiple interpretations. His aim is not to argue or protest, but to offer a variety of perspectives. He writes, "There is no single version of the Mahabharata only many telling, each with its own truth." Pattanaik's way of delivering justice comes from his inclusiveness. By presenting different regional, tribal, and Sanskritic versions of the Mahabharata, he brings back the diversity that is often ignored in traditional texts. This approach reflects what Martha Nussbaum calls the "ethical imagination" the ability of stories to expand our moral understanding by showing different truths. In Pattanaik's view, justice is about dialogue and not opposition. He doesn't aim to change the established canon, but to make it more expansive. His version emphasizes compassion, understanding the context of dharma, and accepting conflicting ideas. In this way, Pattanaik practices cultural narrative justice an effort to bring together fragmented traditions through empathetic interpretation.

Subaltern Narrative Justice

When feminist narrative justice focuses on the silencing of women's voices, subaltern narrative justice centers on issues like class, caste, and political exclusion. In the field of postcolonial theory, the term "subaltern" refers to those who are excluded from mainstream narratives of power. Ranajit Guha's work known as *Subaltern Studies* (1982) and Gita Spivak's analysis of it highlight how historical stories often favor the voices of the powerful while leaving out the perspectives of peasants, tribal people, and social outcasts. Anand Neelakantan's books, *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* and *Ajaya: Rise of Kali*, represent a form of subaltern storytelling. By reimagining the Mahabharata from the perspective of the Kauravas, Neelakantan creates a reversal of dominant narratives. His character Duryodhana says, "History is written by the victors. Truth dies when victory is celebrated," which shows how the act of writing history can be a form of injustice itself an action that causes moral harm through one-sided storytelling. Neelakantan's approach to subaltern justice depends on making narrative empathy more inclusive. His version of the Mahabharata includes characters like Karna, Ekalavya, Shakuni, and the lower-caste citizens of Hastinapura. Their

struggles are not seen as personal failures, but as signs of a larger system of oppression. The narrative challenges the idea of a fixed divine order and the dominance of Brahminical ideas of truth. One character says, "Dharma is the weapon of the powerful. The rest of us only bleed from it," suggesting that the concept of dharma can be used to justify harm against the powerless. By bringing these voices to the forefront, Neelakantan creates a literary form of justice that echoes B.R. Ambedkar's critique of social injustice and aligns with postcolonial values that aim to rediscover human dignity through the retelling of stories.

Comparative Theoretical Insights:

Across these writers, the use of narrative justice serves both as a form and a function. For Divakaruni, justice is about expressing the voice of Draupadi and giving women a space to be heard. For Neelakantan, it's about changing perspectives, like seeing the world through Duryodhana's eyes.

For Pattanaik, it's about allowing multiple versions of the Mahabharata to coexist without conflict. All three share a belief that storytelling is an ethical act, a way to balance the power imbalances found in old myths. They change the Mahabharata from a story about divine order into a conversation about different human experiences. Through their varied styles, these modern retellings show what Paul Ricoeur calls "the justice of narrative configuration" a way that stories can organize experiences to bring about understanding, not control. In the Indian context, narrative justice becomes both literary resistance and cultural healing. It merges artistic expression with moral values, helping to keep myths alive and relevant in today's world.

Author: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anand Neelakantan, and Devdutt Pattanaik
To truly grasp the way contemporary Indian English writers reinterpret the Mahabharata, it's important to look closely at the authors themselves. Each of these writers brings a unique blend of personal experiences, cultural awareness, and philosophical thinking to their work, which in turn changes how we experience the story and its underlying themes. This section provides a detailed look at Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anand Neelakantan, and Devdutt Pattanaik. It explores their reasons for writing, the techniques they use to tell their stories, and the impact they have made on modern Indian English literature.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, born in Kolkata in 1956, is a well-known author who focuses on the experiences of women, memory, and how culture shape's identity. She studied English literature at the University of Calcutta and later worked on creative writing at the University of Houston. Her writing mixes Western storytelling methods with the rich traditions of Indian mythology, often highlighting the connections between gender, migration, and cultural traditions. She creates a voice that speaks both to people in India and to a global audience. Divakaruni's work with the Mahabharata reflects her commitment to feminist reinterpretation of the epic. In her book *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), she gives

the voice of Draupadi through first-person narration, allowing readers to see the epic from the perspective of a woman who is usually ignored in the traditional texts. This method is part of a larger pattern in her books, including *Mistress of Spices* (1997) and *Sister of My Heart* (1999), where female characters navigate patriarchal societies while asserting control over their own stories. By giving Draupadi a voice, Divakaruni practices what can be called feminist narrative justice, reclaiming authority over both the story and the moral lessons within it. Her writing is known for its emotional depth, poetic language, and ethical reflection, showing how storytelling can both entertain and reshape cultural memory (Mukherjee, 2012).

Anand Neelakantan:

Anand Neelakantan, born in 1973 in Odisha, India, has made a significant mark in the field of mythological fiction by redefining traditional heroism. He has a background in law and corporate communication, which he uses to bring clarity and critical thinking to his writing. His most famous work is the *Ajaya* series (2013–2015), which retells the Mahabharata from the viewpoint of the Kauravas, especially Duryodhana and Karna. Neelakantan's approach to storytelling is based on subaltern narrative justice. By focusing on the perspectives of those who have been historically depicted as the "losers," he challenges the moral and ethical boundaries that have traditionally defined the epic. His stories explicitly address issues like caste, class, and systemic oppression, and they show how the characters who are often misunderstood or vilified are, in fact, complex individuals caught in difficult moral situations. For example, Karna's devotion and ethical dilemmas are portrayed not as personal failures but as results of the social injustices he faces. Neelakantan's writing combines suspenseful storytelling, historical accuracy, and deep philosophical thought, making the epic relevant to modern readers while maintaining its mythic importance (Rajan, 2021). Beyond literature, Neelakantan's work invites readers to consider the ethics of storytelling whose version of history is considered valid and whose is overlooked. This aligns with postcolonial and subaltern literary critiques that question the dominance of canonical texts, positioning Neelakantan as a writer who values justice, equity, and ethical remembrance.

Devdutt Pattanaik:

Devdutt Pattanaik, born in 1970 in Mumbai, India, is a mythologist, author, and speaker who explores Indian mythology, philosophy, and culture. While he doesn't primarily write fiction, he uses a combination of scholarship, narrative interpretation, and visual storytelling to engage with myths. His book *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* is a prime example of his approach. It brings together different regional interpretations, folk traditions, and classical Sanskrit texts to create a diverse and inclusive version of the epic. Pattanaik's engagement with the concept of narrative justice is rooted in ethics and inclusivity rather than opposition. He highlights multiple perspectives, ensuring

that voices historically sidelined such as those of women, lower-caste individuals, and regional communities are acknowledged alongside the traditional heroes of the epic. His writing suggests that moral and ethical truths are not singular; the Mahabharata holds many perspectives that deserve recognition. By incorporating illustrations, narrative commentary, and interpretive essays, Pattanaik transforms storytelling into an ethical practice, helping readers understand and navigate ambiguity, contradiction, and moral complexity (Bharucha, 2016). Unlike Divakaruni's emotionally centered storytelling or Neelakantan's revisionist approach, Pattanaik's work is built on contextual understanding. His writing connects the past with the present, showing that myths are living texts that can foster dialogue across different times, cultures, and viewpoints.

Comparative Analysis: Commonalities and Dissimilarities in the Poetics of Narrative Justice

In contemporary Indian English retellings of the Mahabharata, authors employ various nuanced approaches to achieve narrative justice. These retellings aim to recover voices that have been historically marginalized and to reinterpret traditional moral teachings in a way that reflects modern ethical values. Although Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anand Neelakantan, and Devdutt Pattanaik all share a common goal of ethical reclamation, their methods, focus areas, and use of literary devices differ significantly. This variation highlights the richness and diversity found in contemporary myth-making literature. This section explores the shared features and the unique aspects of each author's work, drawing upon both textual evidence and insights from scholars.

Commonalities Across the Three Authors:

Ethical Reclamation through Voice:

All three authors emphasize the importance of giving voice to characters who have traditionally been ignored or silenced. By featuring these characters in their narratives, they challenge the established hierarchies present in the original epic. Divakaruni gives a central role to Draupadi, using her first-person perspective to highlight her internal struggles and moral complexity (Divakaruni, 2008). Neelakantan, on the other hand, shifts the narrative to the Kauravas, portraying them not as villains, but as individuals with their own moral dilemmas and complexities (Neelakantan, 2013, 2015). Pattanaik, in contrast, incorporates a variety of regional, folk, and traditional versions of the story, allowing different perspectives to coexist and emphasizing the importance of diverse voices within the narrative (Pattanaik, 2010). Academic perspectives, such as those of Mukherjee (2012) and Rajan (2021), suggest that these narrative choices reflect a form of redistributive justice in storytelling. By enabling previously unheard voices to be heard, these authors not only challenge existing social and cultural hierarchies but also demonstrate how stories can influence collective memory as much as they do historical records.

Reinterpretation of Dharma and Justice:

Another shared feature among the authors is their re-examination of the concept of dharma. Rather than presenting it as an unchanging, divinely dictated moral code, they view dharma as something that is shaped by context, relationships, and ethical debates. Draupadi, for instance, critiques the way dharma has been used to suppress women: "Dharma is a word men use when they wish to deny women their desires" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 176). Neelakantan points out how dharma has been manipulated to support social inequalities: "Dharma was a privilege the powerful used to shackle the weak" (Neelakantan, 2015, p. 88). Pattanaik, in contrast, emphasizes the idea that justice can be seen differently based on one's position: Justice depends on where you stand; every perspective contains its own truth" (Pattanaik, 2010, p. xvii). These interpretations suggest that narrative justice is closely tied to the rethinking of moral concepts. By challenging established codes of behavior and ethics, the authors encourage readers to reconsider the moral frameworks they have been taught and to recognize the arbitrary nature of historical judgments.

Narrative as Ethical Intervention:

A common feature among these authors is their use of storytelling as a method of engaging with ethical issues. In each of their works, the story is not just a form of entertainment but also a way to deal with epistemic injustice — the unfairness in determining who gets to tell a story and whose viewpoints are considered important. Divakaruni uses a deeply personal first-person narrative, allowing readers to experience Draupadi's thoughts and face the harsh realities of gender-based oppression. Neelakantan employs an omniscient narrator, encouraging readers to understand characters who have been historically judged, thus challenging traditional views of right and wrong. Pattanaik incorporates annotations and illustrations, prompting readers to think about the different truths within the story. Nussbaum (1990) suggests that literature that develops moral imagination is, in itself, a form of justice. These authors, through their distinct literary approaches, demonstrate how storytelling can be a strong tool for building ethical awareness and recognition.

Differences Among the Authors:

Although the authors share a common dedication to addressing justice in storytelling, they vary in their approach, focus, and narrative style, which reflect their unique methods of pursuing narrative justice.

The Nature of Justice:

Divakaruni centers on gendered justice, focusing on Draupadi's personal experience and inner thoughts. Justice is realized through restoring her voice, engaging in self-reflection, and cultivating an ethical awareness. Neelakantan prioritizes subaltern and ideological justice, giving attention to the marginalized Kauravas and other neglected voices. Justice is achieved through rewriting history, critiquing power structures, and challenging moral norms. Pattanaik advocates for cultural and ethical justice, acknowledging the coexistence

of various interpretations. Justice is presented as an ongoing dialogue and a means of education, rather than a direct confrontation.

Narrative Style:

Divakaruni uses a first-person, introspective style that immerses readers in Draupadi's emotional depth and subjective viewpoint. Neelakantan employs an omniscient, revisionist approach, using shifting narrative perspectives to highlight social critique and challenge traditional narratives. Pattanaik adopts an annotated, illustrated, and pluralist style, combining text with visual elements to present multiple versions of the story simultaneously.

Interaction with Canonical Authority

Divakaruni challenges patriarchal authority by questioning male-dominated moral frameworks while keeping the epic's continuity. Neelakantan critiques historical and moral authority by reframing villains as legitimate characters with complex motivations. Pattanaik finds a balance between traditional and folk traditions, promoting inclusivity and open dialogue rather than outright conflict

Scholarly Perspectives:

Various scholars have examined these novels from feminist, postcolonial, and mythological angles:

1. Mukherjee (2012) argues that Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi embodies feminist narrative justice, where emotional subjectivity translates into moral empowerment.
2. Rajan (2021) points out how Neelakantan's Ajaya series explores subaltern narrative ethics, deconstructing historical records and moral binaries.
3. Bharucha (2016) claims that Pattanaik's approach represents cultural narrative justice, as it revives overlooked traditions and affirms moral diversity. In these interpretations, there is agreement that modern retellings of the Mahabharata function as cultural interventions. They encourage ethical reflection, foster empathy, and prompt rethinking of historical narratives.

6. Findings:

The survey of modern Indian English poets reveals that the Mahabharata continue to serve as powerful sources of inspiration. This is because poets can draw deeply from their rich narratives to speak about the issues of today. There is a clear tension between myth and modernity, between tradition and innovation, and it is these writers who keep that tension alive. They do not simply bring back the epics in their old forms, as if trying to relive the past. Instead, they reinterpret them, bringing new questions and new voices into play, as if painting on the same canvas but with fresh colors. Feminist poets have done remarkable work by giving full humanity to characters like Sita, Draupadi, Gargi, and Avvaiyar. Through their stories, these writers challenge patriarchal norms and celebrate the strength and agency of women. Similarly, postcolonial poets have used figures like Rama and Krishna to reflect on national identity and the complexities of communalism. Philosophical poets, on the other hand, examine the moral lessons of sacrifice and revenge and consider their relevance or

irrelevance in a world shaped by political extremism. Across all these works, a common theme emerges: the use of ancient myths as a mirror to reflect on Indian culture and its evolving values.

In Indian English literature, feminist reinterpretations of mythological heroines play a vital role in offering a strong critique of traditional narratives. By giving voice to characters like Draupadi and Urmila, authors such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kane challenge the patriarchal frameworks that have long shaped these stories. Their retellings not only reframe the past but also contribute to ongoing discussions about gender, power, and agency in modern India. Through these stories, ancient myths become tools for rethinking the past and understanding the present. One of the most notable examples is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, which is a powerful feminist reimagining of the Mahabharata. In this novel, Draupadi is no longer just a symbol of honor but a fully realized individual with her own desires, voice, and autonomy. By giving her the role of narrator, the story centers more on the experiences and emotions of women, shifting the focus of the epic toward feminine subjectivity. Divakaruni's Draupadi is not just a passive figure; she actively interprets and engages with the world around her, challenging the patriarchal structures that have long dominated mythological storytelling. In this telling, the personal becomes epic, and the epic becomes deeply personal. The novel not only revisits an ancient story but also reinvents it for a new audience. Through lyrical prose, emotional depth, and mythic innovation, *The Palace of Illusions* offers a resounding affirmation of Draupadi's voice a voice that had always been there, but long left unheard.

This review explores the intricate intertwining of mythology and modernity in Indian English fiction, showing how contemporary authors weave legendary tales to both reflect and critique modern society. Through these narratives, myths function not just as stories from the past but as tools for engaging with cultural identity in a rapidly changing world. The inclusion of mythological elements allows authors to maintain a sense of continuity amid the forces of globalization and urbanization. Writers like Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy exemplify this trend, using mythology as a narrative framework that connects readers to both traditional and contemporary concerns. They bridge the gap between Indian and international audiences, offering insights that are both local and universal. At the same time, such narratives play an essential role in reconstructing national identity, prompting readers to reassess core values in light of current societal changes.

7. Conclusions and Suggestions:

retell the story of the Mahabharata, it becomes clear that these modern versions are not just creative reimagining's they are spaces where narrative justice is actively pursued. Each author brings their own unique approach to give voice to those who were previously

unheard, challenge the old moral structures that have long dominated the story, and encourage readers to engage with the text in a more thoughtful and responsible way. However, the task of balancing myth with modernity is not without its challenges. These stories must be handled with cultural sensitivity to avoid misrepresentations or misinterpretations. Authentic authors must respect the roots of these narratives while ensuring that they speak to the present in meaningful ways. Future research in Indian English fiction can further expand our understanding by exploring lesser-known authors and texts, as well as how emerging voices continue to reinterpret mythology. Ultimately, the dialogue between mythology and modernity captures the complexity of Indian society and the enduring relevance of these ancient stories in shaping contemporary conversations.

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