Epic Voices, Feminist Fires: Reimagining Sita and Draupadi Across Genres

Ayushi Khera
Guest Lecturer, Department of English, University of Allahabad

Abstract: Far from being silent sufferers, Sita and Draupadi—central figures of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*—have always embodied strength, intellect, and an unwavering sense of self. This paper explores how contemporary genre-crossing retellings of their stories, through literature, theatre, and digital narratives, reaffirm their innate agency and moral clarity. By tracing their transformation from epic heroines into feminist icons, the paper emphasizes that these women were not passive recipients of fate, but vocal, and courageous individuals who challenged the injustices of their time.

Drawing upon Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*, and Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, the study demonstrates how genre-shifts—from oral epic to feminist prose, from mythic verse to digital re-imaginings—enable the recovery and amplification of their resistance. These texts do not reinvent Sita and Draupadi; rather, they restore the fire and foresight that tradition often muted. Whether in Draupadi's unwavering confrontation of the Kuru court or Sita's quiet refusal to return to a kingdom that questioned her integrity, their actions remain radical blueprints of resistance.

In a world still governed by patriarchal expectations of womanhood, these mythological figures urge the modern woman not to succumb but to stand tall, speak out, and reclaim dignity. The paper argues that such re-articulations of mythology act as feminist interventions—where Sita and Draupadi are not just remembered, but reborn as archetypes of courage, defiance, and agency.

Keywords: Draupadi; Sita; Feminism; Mythology; Agency; Genre; Resistance; Womanhood; Indian Epics

Introduction

"Na me priyam priyataram atmanah sita;

Maya saha dharmam avasthayati Sadhvi." (Valmiki Ramayana, "Ayodhya Kanda")

("Nothing is dearer to me than Sita, who shall walk with me in *dharma* as my equal." – *Valmiki Ramayana,* "Ayodhya Kanda")

"Whenever *dharma* declines, and *adharma* rises, I manifest myself." (*Bhagvat Gita* 4.7)

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have long been the twin pillars of Indian cultural consciousness. Through Rama's affirmation of Sita as his equal in *dharma* and Krishna's eternal pledge to restore the cosmic balance, these epics establish themselves not only as mythic narratives but also as moral and philosophical touchstones. To speak of *Sita* and *Draupadi* is to enter the heart of this tradition, where myth and memory converge, and where women are exalted as ideals yet often denied agency over their own destinies. Yet, it is within these very paradoxes that the potential for resistance and reinterpretation emerges.

The figures of Sita and Draupadi have occupied a paradoxical position across centuries. At once revered as heroines of endurance and devotion, they have often been silenced within the dominant epic frameworks. Their stories exemplify the cultural double-bind of Indian womanhood: glorified as ideals of purity and sacrifice. Herein lies the feminist urgency of retelling, a process that retrieves silenced voices and re-inscribes them as active agents in the epic imagination.

Equally crucial are the male *dharma*-bearers, Rama and Krishna. Rama embodies a *dharma* caught between personal ties and royal duty; Krishna reframes duty itself in cosmic terms, reminding humanity that *dharma* must constantly be redefined in shifting contexts. Rather than treating them as patriarchal oppressors, modern scholarship has begun to explore their role as ethical paradigms whose actions must be read within the context of cultural, political, and temporal pressures.

Modern feminist retellings reclaim these silenced voices. Writers such as Volga (*The Liberation of Sita*), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (*The Forest of Enchantments*, *The Palace of Illusions*), and Pratibha Ray (*Yajnaseni*) reconfigure Sita and Draupadi as narrators of their own lives.

These works unsettle epic fixities, presenting women not as passive sufferers but as agents of defiance and dignity.

Yet, a visible research gap remains. Comparative studies of Sita and Draupadi are scarce, and even fewer are attempts to place them in dialogue while simultaneously highlighting Rama and Krishna in a balanced, affirmative light. This paper, thus, situates itself at the intersection of feminist literary criticism, myth criticism, postcolonial feminism, and intertextuality. It argues that modern retellings reclaim women's voices while humanising male figures such as Rama and Krishna, thereby creating a nuanced discourse in which myth, gender, and ethics intersect.

Theoretical Framework

The study of Sita and Draupadi across classical epics and contemporary retellings necessitates an interdisciplinary theoretical approach, as their representations intersect questions of gender, myth, narrative form, and cultural authority. Accordingly, this paper draws upon feminist literary theory, myth criticism, postcolonial feminism, narratology, and intertextuality to revisit the epics as both culturally sacred and politically contested texts.

At the core of this study lies feminist literary criticism, particularly Elaine Showalter's concept of gynocriticism, which foregrounds women's writing and women-centred narratives as autonomous sites of meaning. In texts such as Ray's *Yajnaseni* and Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi emerges not as a figure spoken about but as a self-narrating subject. Similarly, Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* enables Sita to articulate a voice long muted within patriarchal epic discourse.

Simone de Beauvoir's proposition that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (*The Second Sex*) illuminates how both figures are shaped by patriarchal expectations of chastity, sacrifice, and devotion, even as feminist retellings attempt to disrupt these constructions. Further, Carol Hanisch's formulation that "the personal is political" frames episodes such as Draupadi's humiliation in the Kuru Sabha and Sita's exile as systemic manifestations of patriarchal power rather than isolated personal tragedies.

Myth criticism situates these feminist voices within the archetypal structures of epic literature. Drawing on Northrop Frye's theory of archetypes, Sita may be read as an earth-bound figure of endurance and regeneration, while Draupadi embodies the fiery archetype of protest and disruption. While these archetypes have traditionally reinforced idealized models of Indian womanhood, contemporary retellings resist their fixity, recasting them as sites of agency rather than passive symbolism.

Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist framework further reveals the binary oppositions governing epic narratives—*dharma/adharma*, purity/impurity, speech/silence. Episodes such as Sita's *agni-pariksha* and Draupadi's disrobing dramatize these binaries, exposing the instability of *dharma* when patriarchal authority silences women. Feminist retellings do not merely invert these binaries but interrogate them, revealing myth as a contested moral space rather than a stable ethical code.

Postcolonial feminist theory offers a crucial lens for examining the double marginalization of epic women—silenced by patriarchal structures and mediated by dominant historiographies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" resonates powerfully with Sita and Draupadi, whose voices in the original epics remain framed and constrained by male narrators. Contemporary women writers reimagine these figures as speaking subjects rather than spoken objects. Volga forges a collective female consciousness through Sita's encounters with marginalized mythic women; Divakaruni reclaims the Ramayana as a *Sitayan*; Ray structures *Yajnaseni* as Draupadi's epistolary address to Krishna. In these retellings, the subaltern not only speaks but reshapes cultural memory, transforming myth into a site of resistance and reclamation.

Narratology and intertextuality together illuminate how feminist retellings restructure epic authority. Gérard Genette's concepts of focalization and analepsis are central to understanding texts like *Yajnaseni*, in which Draupadi recounts her life retrospectively, shifting the narrative focus from dynastic conflict to female interiority. Similarly, Divakaruni's use of first-person narration dismantles the omniscient male voice of epic tradition.

Julia Kristeva's notion of intertextuality further clarifies how these narratives engage dialogically with their epic sources. Rather than rejecting Valmiki or Vyasa, modern retellings converse with them—layering memory, revision, and feminist consciousness. Myth thus emerges not as a static inheritance but as a living, polyphonic tradition continually reshaped by women's voices.

Together, these theoretical frameworks enable a nuanced reading of Sita and Draupadi as complex, speaking subjects embedded within yet resisting patriarchal epic traditions. By integrating feminist criticism, myth theory, postcolonial thought, narratology, and intertextuality, this study foregrounds how contemporary retellings reclaim women's voices while retaining Rama and Krishna as ethically significant bearers of *dharma*.

Archetypes in the Original Epics

The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, beyond being tales of kings and wars, construct archetypes that continue to shape Indian cultural imagination. At their centre stand Sita and Draupadi—women whose suffering and resilience remain tied to the dharmic dilemmas of Rama and Krishna. To return to the original texts before exploring feminist retellings is to acknowledge the foundations upon which reinterpretations are usually built.

Sita in Valmiki's *Ramayana*

Valmiki presents Sita as the epitome of devotion and endurance, "not born of the womb, but sprung from the earth," symbolising purity and divine origin. Rama himself declares: "Nothing is dearer to me than Sita, who shall walk with me in *dharma* as my equal" ("Ayodhya Kanda"). Yet her life is marked by trials, her trial by fire and later exile during pregnancy dramatize the paradox of *dharma,* where public duty overrides personal love. Rama's choices, though often read as harsh, reflect the king's burden of raj *dharma*. Sita's quiet dignity, culminating in her return to Mother Earth, makes her an archetype of womanhood: wronged yet unbroken.

Draupadi in Vyasa's *Mahabharata*

If Sita embodies endurance, Draupadi embodies defiance. Born of fire during Drupada's *yajna*, she is the flame of destiny itself. Her marriage to five husbands makes her both an anomaly and a unifier,

yet her humiliation in the Kuru Sabha defines her destiny. Dragged and nearly disrobed, she demands: "Whom did you lose first, O King—yourself or me?" (Vyasa). This question challenges the very foundations of *dharma*. Krishna's intervention, ensuring her garments remain endless, marks her as both a victim of *adharma* and a catalyst of divine justice. Draupadi thus becomes the fiery archetype of protest against patriarchal silence.

Positive Framing of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna

Both Rama and Krishna, though often critiqued and misrepresented/misinterpreted in the modern discourse, retain their stature as *dharma*-bearers. Rama's choices, while seemingly cruel, reflect the weight of a king's duty over a husband's love. His life dramatizes the tension between individual emotion and collective responsibility, offering a nuanced model of moral complexity rather than patriarchal tyranny. Krishna, by contrast, embodies relational *dharma*. His friendship with Draupadi is a counterpoint to the silence of elders like Bhishma and Drona. Unlike the distant gods of mythology, Krishna's intervention in Draupadi's crisis affirms his role as an intimate protector and saviour, ensuring that *adharma* does not triumph.

Together, these figures create archetypal constellations: Sita as soil, Draupadi as flame; Rama as the burden of duty, Krishna as the freedom of divine play. Their narratives embody binaries—silence and speech, endurance and resistance—that continue to structure Indian gendered imagination. The epics, therefore, serve not only as sacred texts but also as contested spaces, where reverence and rupture coexist.

Re-visioning Sita in Contemporary Texts

If Valmiki's *Ramayana* situates Sita primarily in silence, sacrifice, and chastity, modern retellings by Volga and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni seek to restore her agency, giving her a voice that challenges patriarchal expectations while still preserving Rama's dignity. Both *The Liberation of Sita* and *The Forest of Enchantments* are not mere retellings but narrative revolutions, as they shift the axis of interpretation from the idealized image of the submissive wife to the resilient, self-aware woman who negotiates her suffering with dignity and wisdom. In these narratives, Sita ceases to be the woman

defined by her trials of fire and exile; instead, she becomes a seeker of truth, a repository of feminine strength, and a teacher of liberation.

Sisterhood, Silence, and the Making of a Liberated Sita (*The Liberation of Sita*)

Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* reimagines Sita's exile not as a tale of victimhood but as a spiritual odyssey towards self-realization. Each encounter Sita has—with Ahalya, Renuka, Urmila, and Surpanakha—becomes a lesson in womanhood, solidarity, and resistance against patriarchal structures. Ahalya teaches her resilience in the face of ostracization; Renuka reveals the cost of unquestioned obedience; Urmila embodies invisible sacrifice, having given up her conjugal life for Lakshman's *dharma,* while Surpanakha reframes desire as power rather than sin.

Together, these women represent what Elaine Showalter calls a "gynocritical tradition," where women's experiences generate their own system of values and knowledge. Through them, Sita evolves from a passive wife in the patriarchal epic into an agent of liberation.

Her refusal to return to Ayodhya is the culmination of this journey: "No kingdom can tempt me; no throne can hold me; I return to the womb that bore me" (Volga 132). Yet she paradoxically becomes Rama's eternal talisman: "You will carry me always, not as your wife but as your protective charm" (134). Here, Sita asserts her dignity while refusing patriarchal reins, becoming both absent and eternal. This redefinition repositions her as both absent and eternal, a presence that guards Rama beyond conjugal duty.

Simone de Beauvoir's words resonate here: *"*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*"* (*The Second Sex*). Sita "becomes" not the ideal wife shaped by male *dharma,* but a woman shaped by her own choices and solidarities.

***Sitayan*: The Self-Narrating Voice of Resistance (*The Forest of Enchantments*)**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* radicalizes the tradition further by allowing Sita to narrate her own life in what she terms the *Sitayan*. In doing so, the text performs what Julia Kristeva describes as an act of intertextuality: the layering of myths to create new meanings that resist canonical silencing. Divakaruni gives Sita words of rebellion against patriarchal memory:

*"*Do not call it the *Ramayana*. Call it the *Sitayan*, for it is my story too*"* (Divakaruni 5). This assertion is revolutionary, for it re-centres a female voice in an epic long dominated by male narrators.

Sita rejects Ayodhya at the end, choosing to return to her mother Earth: *"*I cannot return to a kingdom that doubted me; my body belongs to the Earth, my spirit to truth*"* (341). Her act is both dignified and defiant, demonstrating what Carol Hanisch meant when she said, *"The personal is political."* By asserting that her suffering is not merely private but emblematic of women's subjugation under patriarchal scrutiny, Sita becomes a political figure of resistance.

Divakaruni also complicates Rama's role. Though he enforces patriarchal duty, he is portrayed as a lonely and grieving figure: *"*The throne was his, but his heart was empty; it beat only for the wife he had lost*"* (299). This sympathetic rendering resists a simplistic feminist critique by showing patriarchy as a system that wounds men as much as women. Rama is caught between *Raj Dharma* and personal love, his solitude symbolising the cost of inflexible duty.

Even in her maternal role, Sita asserts equality: Luv and Kush embody the love of both parents, not privileging one over the other. In this sense, Divakaruni dismantles the binary of dutiful wife versus wronged woman, portraying Sita as lover, mother, rebel, and sage, simultaneously.

From Fire to Earth: Sita's Journey from Subjugation to Sovereignty

Both Volga and Divakaruni craft Sita's "second birth," where she is no longer confined to patriarchal scripts of fidelity and chastity. Instead, she emerges as a philosopher of dignity, solidarity, and spiritual freedom. Her refusals—whether to return to Ayodhya or to submit to male judgment—are not mere acts of rebellion but affirmations of selfhood.

Gayatri Spivak's concern with the silenced subaltern becomes particularly relevant here: "The subaltern cannot speak*"* unless given a narrative agency. These retellings allow Sita to finally speak, and in doing so, they transform her from a silenced epic heroine into a torchbearer of feminist consciousness.

By becoming both Rama's protective charm and the self-narrator of the *Sitayan*, Sita transcends her epic confines. She redefines womanhood not as passive endurance but as active sovereignty—choosing solidarity over silence, Earth over throne, and selfhood over submission.

Re-visioning Draupadi in Contemporary Texts

If Sita is the archetype of endurance, Draupadi is fire incarnate—born of flames, bound by polygamy, humiliated in the Kuru Sabha, yet unbroken in spirit. Contemporary writers such as Pratibha Ray and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reclaim her voice, making her not only the queen of Indraprastha but also the epic's most complex heroine.

Fire and Epistles: Draupadi in *Yajnaseni*

Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* gives Draupadi her own voice through an epistolary form addressed to Krishna from her final moments, turning the "fire-born" heroine into a reflective narrator of her own destiny. In this intimate mode, Draupadi confesses her anguish over polygamy, her inner conflicts about *dharma,* and her suppressed desires. She admits: *"*All events of my life were similarly dramatic. From that day till the last instant of my life, I would have to appear in five roles*"* (Ray 63). Through this candid admission, Draupadi emerges not as a silent archetype but as a woman caught between multiple roles that fracture her sense of self.

One of the most searing episodes in *Yajnaseni* is her humiliation in the Kuru *Sabha*. When Yudhishthir stakes and loses her in the game of dice, Draupadi becomes an object of male barter. As she is dragged into the assembly and disrobed, she cries out in anguish: *"*Whom should I call my lord? The one who gambled me away, or the ones who stood mute?*"* Here, Krishna's intervention transforms the scene into a cosmic statement of *dharma.* Her sari becomes endless, and her dignity remains intact, proving that divine justice will not allow a woman's honour to be fully consumed by *adharma*. Northrop Frye's myth criticism helps us read this as a moment where archetypes reassert themselves—Draupadi as the eternal feminine whose violation threatens cosmic order, and Krishna as the saviour who restores it.

Ray also touches Draupadi's hidden link with Karna—her regret at mocking him during her *svayamvara,* her confession of forbidden longing. This shadow desire renders her all the more human, revealing a woman of contradictions: loyal yet desirous, humiliated yet dignified. This acknowledgement situates Draupadi in the realm of forbidden desire, echoing Julia Kristeva's theory of the *abject*, where desire becomes both alluring and taboo, silently shaping identity.At the heart of her trials is her *sakha*, Krishna—the only man who never abandons or judges her. He consoles her, protects her dignity, and validates her voice when others suppress it. In him, Draupadi finds companionship that transcends patriarchy.

Palaces and Passions: Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* also reimagines Draupadi through a first-person perspective, narrating her life from her fiery birth to her final journey. The novel gives Draupadi a deeply emotional and subjective voice, making her not only the queen of Indraprastha but also a woman of desire, doubt, and defiance.

The humiliation in the Kuru Sabha remains one of the most powerful episodes. Draupadi describes the terror of being dragged by her hair, her husbands rendered voiceless, and her body reduced to a wager. Yet it is Krishna's intervention that defines the moment. As her garments become infinite, she realizes that while men may fail her, her *sakha* will not. Divakaruni describes Draupadi's gratitude with tenderness: Krishna becomes her eternal protector, reminding readers that *dharma* is upheld not through silence but through action that defends the vulnerable.

Divakaruni also foregrounds Draupadi's forbidden attraction to Karna, making it more explicit than Ray. She confesses: *"*More than once I thought, if only he had been allowed to string the bow that day, how different my life might have been.*"* This portrayal reframes Draupadi not merely as a catalyst of war but as a woman of unfulfilled desire, reminding readers that her emotional landscape is as complex as her political one. Here, Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine* becomes relevant: Draupadi's voice inscribes silenced female desire back into the cultural narrative.

Krishna again emerges as her saviour and confidant. He guides her perception of honour and destiny, reminding her that her humiliation is not her shame but society's. He, thus, stands as a rare male archetype who upholds *dharma* without suppressing women's agency, aligning friendship with cosmic justice.

Desire, *Dharma*, and the Feminine Voice

Together, *Yajnaseni* and *The Palace of Illusions* reposition Draupadi as a woman of contradictions—vulnerable yet indomitable, silenced yet eloquent, desiring yet dutiful. Both retellings emphasize the disrobing scene as the crucible of her life, a moment where *dharma* and *adharma* clash most violently, and Krishna becomes her saviour.

In Frye's terms, Draupadi evolves into an archetype that cannot be contained by a single narrative; in Cixous's vision, her voice breaks through the silences of patriarchal myth; and in Kristeva's framework, her desire for Karna unsettles the binaries of purity and impurity. Ultimately, she is not just a heroine of the past but a torchbearer of timeless feminine resilience, with Krishna by her side as an eternal friend and guide.

Comparative Analysis of Sita and Draupadi

Though situated in different epics, Sita and Draupadi are bound by shared experiences of public humiliation and moral trial, yet they respond through sharply contrasting modes of agency. While Sita embodies a dignified ethics of withdrawal and restraint, Draupadi articulates justice through speech, confrontation, and demand. Their comparison thus reveals not a hierarchy of resistance but a spectrum of feminist possibility within epic tradition.

Shared Experiences of Humiliation and Endurance

Public humiliation becomes the crucible of both women's lives. Sita's *agni-pariksha* subjects her chastity to public scrutiny, transforming her body into a site where patriarchal honour is tested. Though she emerges unscathed, the ordeal exposes the violence embedded within *Raj Dharma*, where

a woman's virtue is subordinated to public opinion. Her subsequent exile during pregnancy intensifies this injustice, revealing how female suffering is normalized under the guise of moral order.

Draupadi's humiliation in the Kuru *Sabha* is more overtly violent. Staked and lost by Yudhishthir, she is dragged before an assembly of elders sworn to uphold *dharma*. Her unanswered question — "Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?"—becomes a devastating ethical indictment. Unlike Sita's trial, which demands silent endurance, Draupadi's ordeal forces *dharma* to answer publicly for its own collapse.

Contrasts: Silence and Defiance

The crucial distinction between Sita and Draupadi lies not in the degree of their suffering but in their chosen responses. Sita's resistance is articulated through silence and withdrawal. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, her refusal to return to Ayodhya is not submission but a deliberate ethical choice—a rejection of a social order that demands perpetual proof of female purity. Her return to the Earth becomes a final assertion of autonomy, transforming silence into sovereignty.

Draupadi, by contrast, resists through speech and confrontation. She refuses to internalize humiliation and instead demands accountability from those who wrong her. In both *Yajnaseni* and *The Palace of Illusions*, her voice exposes the hypocrisy of patriarchal *dharma*, making protest itself a moral act. Where Sita withdraws from a corrupt system, Draupadi forces that system to confront its own failure.

The Role of Relationships

Their resilience is shaped by relational frameworks that enable, rather than confine, their agency. Sita's liberation in Volga's retelling emerges through sisterhood—her encounters with Ahalya, Renuka, Urmila, and Surpanakha create a feminist lineage of shared wisdom. These women teach her that dignity lies not in obedience but in choice, allowing Sita to reconceptualize freedom beyond marital duty.

Draupadi's sustaining relationship, by contrast, is her friendship with Krishna. As *sakha*, he listens, intervenes, and validates her pain when even her husband's remains silent. His defence of her

dignity affirms that justice requires action, not passive reverence. Through Krishna, Draupadi's voice gains ethical legitimacy, transforming personal violation into cosmic rupture.

Modern Implications

Contemporary feminist retellings do not position Sita and Draupadi as oppositional figures but as complementary articulations of womanhood. Sita reclaims silence as ethical refusal, while Draupadi reclaims speech as moral demand. Together, they dismantle the notion of a singular feminine ideal within Indian mythology, offering instead a plural model of agency that accommodates endurance and rebellion, spirituality and desire.

Their revisions demonstrate that epic womanhood is not static but dialogic, continually reshaped by cultural memory and feminist imagination. Through them, myth becomes not a site of confinement but a space of negotiation, where tradition and resistance coexist.

Reclaiming Rama and Krishna in a Feminist Lens

While feminist retellings foreground women's silenced voices, a nuanced reading also requires re-examining the representations of Rama and Krishna. Rather than positioning them solely as patriarchal enforcers, contemporary reinterpretations reveal their complex negotiation with *dharma*—sometimes complicit, sometimes corrective—within deeply gendered social orders.

Lord Rama: The Cost of *Rajdharma*

Rama's portrayal in the *Ramayana* has long provoked ethical debate, particularly in relation to the *agni-pariksha* and Sita's later exile. A feminist reading does not absolve these acts but situates them within the tension between *raj dharma* (royal duty) and *sva-dharma* (personal obligation). Rama's declaration — "Nothing is dearer to me than Sita, who shall walk with me in *dharma* as my equal" ("Ayodhya Kanda") establishes her as a moral partner rather than a subordinate, even as his subsequent actions expose the limits of ethical agency within patriarchal kingship.

Contemporary retellings emphasize the cost of this ethical rigidity. In *The Liberation of Sita* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, Rama emerges as a solitary figure whose adherence to public duty results in profound personal loss. Sita's refusal to return to Ayodhya reframes this loss not as

abandonment but as the inevitable consequence of a social order that privileges reputation over justice. Rama thus appears less as a tyrant than as a tragic bearer of a flawed moral system.

Lord Krishna: *Sakha*, Guide, Protector

If Rama embodies the burden of duty, Krishna represents relational *dharma* grounded in intervention and empathy. His role in the *Mahabharata* consistently aligns moral authority with action, most notably in his intervention during Draupadi's disrobing. By preserving her dignity when institutional *dharma* collapses, Krishna exemplifies the *Bhagavad Gita's* assertion that divine presence manifests when justice fails.

In *Yajnaseni* and *The Palace of Illusions*, Krishna's significance extends beyond miraculous rescue. As Draupadi's *sakha*, he listens, counsels, and legitimizes her anger and desire—forms of female expression otherwise suppressed within patriarchal frameworks. His companionship affirms that ethical authority need not be hierarchical, and that friendship itself can function as a mode of feminist support.

Feminist Reclamation

Feminist reinterpretations of Rama and Krishna do not seek exoneration but re-contextualization. Rama's solitude exposes the emotional toll of rigid moral codes, while Krishna's intimacy models an alternative masculinity rooted in empathy and ethical responsiveness. Together, they illustrate divergent modes of engaging with patriarchal structures—one constrained by institutional duty, the other capable of disrupting injustice through relational intervention.

Rama's Solitude and Krishna's Companionship: Complementary Archetypes

Read together, Rama and Krishna articulate complementary masculine archetypes within the epic tradition. Rama embodies the tragic solitude of moral absolutism, where adherence to law demands personal sacrifice. Krishna, by contrast, represents ethical flexibility, where justice is preserved through presence, dialogue, and action. Feminist retellings do not dismantle their legacies but recalibrate them, allowing male figures to coexist with women's agency rather than eclipse it.

For Sita and Draupadi, these masculine figures neither define nor diminish their identities. Sita asserts dignity through withdrawal; Draupadi claims justice through speech. In both cases, *dharma* is reimagined not as domination but as relational balance.

Genre and Narrative Transformation

The transformation of Sita and Draupadi from epic heroines to feminist subjects is not merely thematic but fundamentally shaped by shifts in genre and narrative form. As the epics move from oral, collective traditions to contemporary written retellings, authority over storytelling is redistributed—allowing women to reclaim narrative control over lives previously mediated by male voices.

Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* employs the epistolary mode to collapse distance between narrator and reader, granting Draupadi interpretive authority over her own life. Writing to Krishna from her final moments, Draupadi reframes epic events retrospectively, shifting attention from dynastic conflict to female interiority. The letter becomes both confession and critique, transforming personal memory into ethical testimony.

Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* adopts a fragmentary encounter structure, replacing linear epic progression with episodic feminist pedagogy. Each meeting with a marginalized woman interrupts the epic's teleology, allowing Sita's consciousness to evolve through collective female experience rather than marital destiny.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* and *The Palace of Illusions* function as counter-epic narratives by displacing the omniscient male voice with first-person female focalization. By allowing Sita and Draupadi to narrate their own lives, these texts challenge the epistemic authority of the original epics and foreground women's emotional, ethical, and political subjectivity. This narrative shift does not reject the epic tradition but reorients it. The epics are no longer sites where women are judged, remembered, or idealized by others; they become spaces where women interpret themselves.

Narratological and intertextual strategies together reveal genre as a feminist intervention rather than a neutral vessel. Techniques such as retrospective narration, internal focalization, and textual dialogue with epic sources reconfigure authority, allowing women to inhabit myth without being confined by it. In this sense, feminist retellings do not merely retell stories—they restructure the conditions under which meaning is produced.

Myth thus emerges not as static inheritance but as a living discourse, continually reshaped by narrative form and cultural need. Through shifts in genre—from oral epic to epistolary confession, fragmentary encounter, and counter-epic autobiography—Sita and Draupadi are reconstituted as narrative subjects rather than symbolic functions. Genre becomes the mechanism through which feminist consciousness enters myth, ensuring that these figures continue to speak across historical, cultural, and ideological boundaries.

Conclusion

Feminist retellings of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* function as acts of cultural reclamation that reconfigure epic memory itself. By restoring narrative authority to Sita and Draupadi, contemporary writers do not merely recover silenced voices but also transform the ethical centre of the epics, repositioning women as agents of meaning rather than mere bearers of moral endurance.

Notably, these retellings do not displace male figures to elevate female agency. Rama and Krishna remain integral to the moral architecture of the epics, though reimagined with greater ethical complexity. Rama emerges as a figure shaped—and constrained—by the burdens of raj *dharma*, while Krishna embodies an ethics of relational justice grounded in intervention, friendship, and moral responsiveness. Together, they underscore that *dharma* is neither inflexible law nor abstract ideal, but a lived, relational practice.

Sita and Draupadi ultimately emerge as complementary articulations of feminine agency within epic tradition. Sita transforms withdrawal into ethical refusal, asserting dignity through choice rather than compliance. Draupadi, by contrast, claims justice through speech, confrontation, and

moral insistence. Together, they dismantle the notion of a singular ideal of womanhood, offering instead a plural, dynamic model that accommodates endurance and rebellion, silence and protest.

The enduring power of these retellings lies equally in their formal innovation. Through epistolary narration, counter-epic focalization, and fragmentary feminist encounters, genre becomes a site of resistance where authority is redistributed and meaning renegotiated. Myth thus remains a living discourse—capable of responding to changing ethical, cultural, and gendered realities.

Future scholarship may extend these feminist re-visions into regional literatures, performance traditions, cinema, and digital storytelling, where Sita and Draupadi continue to acquire new cultural afterlives. Such engagements will further demonstrate that epic traditions endure not through preservation alone, but through reinterpretation, dialogue, and ethical renewal.

In reclaiming Sita and Draupadi, feminist retellings do not dismantle the epic tradition; they reveal its unfinished ethical possibilities, ensuring that the voices at its margins remain central to its future.

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