

## Deconstructing Myth: Gender, Subalternity, and Moral Complexity in Contemporary Mahabharata Fiction

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### Abstract

This study investigates the theme of demythologization in modern retellings of the Mahabharata, with a focus on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* and Anand Neelakantan's *Asura*. By comparing these narratives with the original epic, the paper examines the reconfiguration of characters, narrative structures, and ethical frameworks through feminist and subaltern lenses. Findings indicate that these retellings amplify marginalized voices, destabilize moral binaries, and offer a historically grounded reinterpretation of the epic, highlighting its continuing relevance in contemporary literary discourse.

**Keywords:** Mahabharata, demythologization, feminist theory, subaltern studies, Draupadi, Duryodhana, narrative ethics

### I. Introduction

The Mahabharata, as a foundational epic of Indian literature, has long served as a site of ethical, philosophical, and literary exploration. Its traditional interpretations often privilege the Pandava perspective while marginalizing women and other non-Pandava characters (Ganguli 1; Lutgendorf 102). Contemporary retellings critically engage with the epic, reimagining its narratives to foreground previously silenced voices and complex ethical dilemmas.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* centers Draupadi, exploring her political intelligence, ethical reasoning, and personal agency. Anand Neelakantan's

*Asura* repositions the narrative from the perspective of the Kauravas, highlighting social injustices and ethical ambiguity. This study asks: How do these retellings demythologize the Mahabharata? How are feminist and subaltern perspectives operationalized to recover marginalized voices? And how do narrative strategies mediate ethical and historical engagement?

## II. Discussion

Classical scholarship emphasizes the epic's didactic and heroic dimensions, often marginalizing women and non-Pandava characters (Ganguli 1; Lutgendorf 102). Contemporary analyses underscore the importance of ethical plurality and marginalized perspectives (Richman 12; Dhand 78). Divakaruni reconstructs Draupadi's agency, portraying her strategic and ethical decision-making (Kumar 145; Divakaruni 67). Neelakantan reframes traditionally vilified characters, revealing the socio-political forces shaping their choices (Neelakantan 102; Srinivasan 88). The trend toward demythologization reflects a shift toward historical plausibility, ethical nuance, and critical engagement with the epic's socio-cultural dimensions (Ramanujan 56; Hildebeitel 51).

The theoretical frameworks such as feminist theory elucidates how Divakaruni foregrounds female agency, particularly Draupadi's ethical and political autonomy (Dhand 82; Spivak 271). Subaltern studies illuminate the voices of marginalized groups, including the Kauravas, situating their actions within historical and socio-political contingencies (Guha 4; Spivak 271). Historiographical approaches emphasize narrative reconstruction grounded in socially intelligible contexts, highlighting human agency and contingency rather than divine determinism (Hildebeitel 51; Ramanujan 56). Combined, these frameworks support a critical evaluation of demythologization, ethical reorientation, and narrative innovation.

While reinterpreting the characters of the Mahabharata, it traditionally limits Draupadi and Gandhari to peripheral roles and depicts the Kauravas as morally rigid (Ganguli 401, 423). Divakaruni recasts Draupadi as a strategic and ethically reflective agent: "I married five men, not because fate demanded it, but because I understood the

power that could be wielded in that union” (Divakaruni 45). Neelakantan humanizes the Kauravas: “We were not born evil. We were taught to obey, to endure, to struggle against a system that favored one set of brothers over another” (Neelakantan 78). Such reconstructions destabilize traditional moral binaries.

The original epic privileges the Pandava perspective, with limited access to female and marginalized voices (Ganguli 312). Divakaruni employs first-person narration to center Draupadi’s consciousness, while Neelakantan uses third-person limited narration to foreground the Kauravas’ social and ethical dilemmas (Kumar 147; Neelakantan 115). Polyphony and interior monologues enrich the psychological and ethical depth of characters, reinforcing demythologization.

Dharma in the Mahabharata is prescriptive and divinely sanctioned (Ganguli 457). Divakaruni and Neelakantan present morality as contextually grounded and socially informed. Draupadi asserts: “I could not let them humiliate me, for in my dignity lay the dignity of those who had no voice” (Divakaruni 112). Duryodhana explains: “I fight not because I desire war, but because I have been left with no choice by the injustices of those in power” (Neelakantan 134). These perspectives highlight the contingency and plurality of ethical reasoning.

Divakaruni foregrounds gendered agency, emphasizing women’s ethical and political authority (Divakaruni 158). Neelakantan emphasizes subaltern agency, giving voice to characters marginalized in canonical interpretations (Neelakantan 147). Both approaches demonstrate how demythologization recovers silenced perspectives and reshapes ethical and historical consciousness.

While maintaining narrative fidelity, both novels reconfigure character psychology, ethical deliberation, and historical context. Demythologization reconciles tradition with contemporary concerns, enriching the epic’s interpretive possibilities and challenging hierarchical narrative authority.

The process of demythologization facilitates ethical plurality, amplifies marginalized voices, and reconstructs historical consciousness. Divakaruni’s Draupadi exemplifies feminist reclamation of agency, while Neelakantan’s Kauravas illustrate

subaltern recovery (Dhand 82; Spivak 271). Narrative techniques, including polyphonic and interior monologue, foster ethical engagement and empathy, challenging static moral hierarchies (Hiltebeitel 51; Srinivasan 88). These retellings intersect with historiographical concerns by situating events within socially and historically intelligible contexts, emphasizing human agency over divine predetermination (Hiltebeitel 48). Consequently, modern retellings provide a platform for ethical reflection, historical awareness, and social critique, contributing to literary and scholarly discourse on epic reinterpretation, feminist and subaltern ethics, and narrative innovation.

### III. Conclusion

Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* and Neelakantan's *Asura* exemplify how demythologization reshapes character agency, narrative perspective, and moral frameworks. By foregrounding Draupadi and the Kauravas, these novels challenge patriarchal and victor-centric hierarchies, presenting ethical pluralism and historical contingency. Narrative techniques enhance reader engagement and facilitate critical reflection on morality, justice, and power.

Demythologization emerges as both an ethical and historiographical strategy, recovering silenced voices, reconstructing moral frameworks, and situating the Mahabharata within socially and historically intelligible contexts. Future research could explore intersections with postcolonial, psychoanalytic, or ecocritical perspectives to further expand understanding of modern epic retellings. These works affirm the enduring relevance of the Mahabharata in contemporary literary, ethical, and cultural discourse.

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