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## RECONSTRUCTING EPIC NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY FILMS

-Nikita Shivaraj Patil  
Research Scholar  
Department of Studies in English  
Karnatak University, Dharwad

-Dr. Mukund Lamani  
Professor  
Department of English  
Karnatak Arts College, Dharwad

### Abstract:

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are the Indian epics that profoundly serve as repository of knowledge, ethics and moral values. The timeless contribution of the epics can be seen in literature, philosophy, politics, education, arts and media. The epics act as the foundational texts inspiring from the classical poetry to contemporary retellings and films. The mythological characters, their identity, decisions, representation and dilemmas continue to influence, shape and have an impact on the contemporary scenarios in society. Since the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and the characters in it have a powerful impact in shaping human identity, conduct, behavior and psyche, it's very important to know how rightly they are pictured, portrayed and represented in literature.

Films are the powerful tool that influences people of all social strata across all timelines. The episodes of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have been telecasted as daily soaps, dramas, short films, web series and films. There is a visible shift and change in the narratives and adaptations of films in contemporary times. The traditional narratives of character representation, gender stereotypes, assignment of role and identity in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have been relooked, reconstructed and reinterpreted in the film adaptations.

The present paper focuses on two full length films and a short film; Mani Ratnam's 'Raavan', Prakash Jha's 'Raajneeti' and Sujoy Ghosh's 'Ahalya'. All the selected films are the modern retellings of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in a new fashion that has not been looked at in traditional narratives. The films focus on the wronged characters and narrate their plight, dilemmas, choices and stories of their making.

**Keywords:** Reinterpretation, reconstruction, modern retellings, Ramayana, Mahabharata

## Introduction:

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have significantly shaped films developing from direct adaptation of epics to modern day retellings and interpretations. Modern day Indian cinema has turned the epics' traditional narrative and framework of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* into a novel retelling interpreted with the new lens. Films evolving from 'Sampoorna Ramayanam', 'Shri Ram Rajyam' to modern day films like 'Raavan', 'Raajneeti', 'Kalyug' and many more goes in the list. The evolution in the narrative can be drastically seen addressing the modern concerns. Also the modern day films have re-imagined the characters in a new light paving way to audience to question the basic concept of good and evil. The retellings have also used the novel technique of demythification and reconstruction of the traditional narratives using new perspectives.

## Reconstruction of the Epics in 'Raavan', 'Raajneeti' and 'Ahalya':

Mani Ratnam's film 'Raavan' is a 2010 film that narrates Raavan's *Ramayana* that is antagonist story of the epic. The film humanizes the villain of the epic *Ramayana*. The film focuses on the tribal leader Beera starring Abhishek Bachan as Ravana. Beera is a wronged figure who happens to be a subaltern, a tribal leader fighting against the state. He kidnaps Ragini starring Aishwarya Rai as Sita, wife of Dev Pratap Sharma (Ram) who is posted as a police officer in Lal Maati. The film focuses on the struggles of the subaltern portraying the 'other' side of the story. The film adapts the core essence of the epic *Ramayana* but flips the traditional narrative challenging the myths of morality and questions the acts of 'hero'. The film shows the parallel and ongoing tussle between a tribal group and the State using the core of the epic *Ramayana*. The film overthrows the orthodox and dogmatic narratives of morality that have subverted the stories of subalterns who have endured oppression, rapes and conquest. The recasting in the film shows Ravana as wronged subaltern and Ram as agent of imperialism.

The film begins with the abduction of Ragini by Beera. Beera is shown to be very violent tribal leader who is waiting to take his revenge for the injustice that has happened against his clan by the state. Beera abducts Ragini, wife of police officer to avenge his sister's rape and death. His sister's marriage is intervened by a police raid and she is taken to police custody where she is gang raped by the police inside a police station. And later she commits suicide, this act is a metaphor to mutilation of Shurpanaka in the *Ramayana*. Dev is not a perfect being as Lord Ram, he is flawed just like Ravana in the epic the *Ramayana*. As the film progresses he has more of villain traits than Beera. Beera is taken as a threat to state and police is behind him planning his encounter. The movie questions the traditional beliefs of good and evil. The film also shows that no character is perfect as shown in the ancient epics not even Lord Ram and neither is Dev in the film. In the climax scene when Ragini comes back to her husband Dev, it's not a happy union indeed, rather he questions her virtue just like Ram questioned Sita and asked her to give a trial by fire (Agnipariksha). It's then Ragini sees the true color of her husband and that instant reminds her of Beera who had kidnapped her but never touched her or tried to molest her in any ways. In the climax one can see contrasting change in Ragini wherein initially she was asking her husband to kill Beera and now was standing between Beera and the bullets to save him from death. Ragini learns the truth behind kidnapping her and realizes that Beera is not the character in grey shade. She also learns that the clan who kidnapped her were way better humans than her husband and his state. A bonding is nurtured between Beera and Ragini linking it to Stockholm and Lima syndrome. In the end when Ragini is standing in between to take the bullets herself, Beera touches her head for the first time in the entire film and that is the only physical touch seen in the movie, and he takes the bullet shot and falls off from the valley. He accepts the fate just like Ravana did in the *Ramayana*, and takes up the punishment for touching another woman. Hence the movie makes the audience re-examine our prejudices and choices of who is hero and who is villain of the story.

This film is not the pioneer attempt of looking at the alternative 'other' side of the story. The ideas taken up in the film by Mani Ratnam resembles to that of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule's reinterpretation of tales from shudras point of view. In Phule's *Gulamgiri* he talks about all the ten avatars of Vishnu and how in each rebirth or each avatara defeats and destroys the counterpart shudras. Each struggle that is going on

today to save forests and tribal culture against the system picks up retelling of the epics. In this context the questions asked by Phule years ago seems relevant in present scenario, “Were the Hindu god-avatars, Ram, Vaman, merely enforcing the will of the imperial state against its hapless victims? Were the demons, rakshasas defenders of indigenous life and liberty?”

Sujay Ghosh’s Bengali short film, ‘Ahalya’ is the reimagining and reconstruction of the mythological tale of Ahalya’s infidelity from the epic *Ramayana*. It is a modern feminist retelling of the story of female subjugation. Starring Radhika Apte as Ahalya, Soumitra Chatterjee as Gautam, husband of Ahalya, Tota Roy Chaudhari, a police officer as Indra. The film is a comment on patriarchy and female subjugation. Unlike the original tale Ahalya in the short film is not cursed of infidelity but rather punishes men who try to take advantage of women. In the film, Ahalya is not punished and turned into stone unlike the original tale but rather men who try to objectify and sexually assault woman are turned into doll. The film adapts the technique of mythological reversal in order to address the modern concerns. The film addresses Ahalya not as a victim but an agent of trap to check the morality of men and punish them who succumb to temptation. The film depicts the female gaze and acts as a tale of caution reversing the traditional narration against men who use their power to objectify women. Apparently it is not Ahalya who is punished of infidelity like in the traditional epics but rather Indra is punished and is turned into stone. So the film brings in justice to the victim by punishing the victimiser and turning them into a doll. Even in modern times women are easily blamed for the crime that happens against them, so the blame game of the society and patriarchy often punishes the victim. So it is really impactful when the epics change their narratives and bring in solutions to address the modern day concerns.

Prakash Jha’s film ‘Raajneeti’ is a modern retelling of the *Mahabharata* released in 2010. The core essence and themes of this film parallels with the epic *Mahabharata*, addressing the politics around dynastic succession. The characters in the movie act as modern counterparts of the epic *Mahabharata*. Samar Pratap is based on the character Arjun starring Ranbir Kapoor, who happens to be the younger son of Chandra Pratap. Indu is the female lead of the movie starring Katrina Kaif, who initially was in love with Samar but is married to Prithviraj Pratap, elder brother of Samar and founder of Jana Shakti party starring Arjun Rampal as Bhima. This marriage was forced on Indu as part of political decision and her character is based on Draupadi, who suffers due to political alliances. Veerendra Pratap as Duryodhana starring Manoj Bajpayee is candidate competing for chief minister post from the Rashtrawadi Party. Sooraj Kumar as Karna starring Ajay Devgan illegitimate son of Bharti Pratap(Kunti) and is later killed by Samar who happens to be his half brother. Brij gopal, brother of Bharati Pratap also mentor of Jana Shakti party starring Nana Patekar, glimpses of Krishna, Shakuni and Bhishma can be seen in this character.

The original epic is the war between dharma and adharma but the movie depicts every character in the grey shade all of them driven by greed of power. The movie doesn’t really show any character on the side of dharma as each of them has their own agenda and motives to gain power and have an upper hand in politics. The film also highlights the struggle of women caused due to power struggle and also showcases how woman are used as pawn in the power game of men.

The movie centers on dispute over dynasty succession which parallels with the dispute between Pandavas and Kauravas in the epic. Brijji’s guidance mirrors the grey strategies to win over the battle questions the morally ambiguous strategies and fowl play used to gain power. Indu is forced to marry Prithvi when she was actually in love with Samar again mirroring the marriage of Draupadi to Pandava brothers. The race of election to become chief minister is the reimagined version of the Kurukshetra war between Pandavas and Kauravas, involving all the plotting, betrayals, riots, murders, bloodshed and violent fowl play to secure power.

Mythological figures are transformed into politicians and also no divine intervention or role play of supernatural aspects in the frame can be seen but rather involves political plotting and agendas. The epic is reframed from the kurukshetra war to war of elections for parliamentary power. The film does not depict any perfect rightful heroes unlike in the epic but rather shows politicians who are morally corrupt and ambiguous. No character in the film can be seen representing a single epic figure but rather can be seen as

an amalgamation of multiple characters of the epic. For instance Brijji sometimes mirrors the character of Krishna guiding the Tripathi family, sometimes can be seen as Shakuni who uses fowl play and strategies to succeed.

### **Demythification of Myths:**

All these films can be interpreted using Adrienne Rich's concept of "Revision" which is an act of re-visiting, re-reading, re-examining and re-interpreting old texts or old literature with a new perspective. Rich's revision breaks the hold of patriarchy in the narratives, gives a whole new point of re-writing and re-reading the narratives. It's an act of survival of women stories and narratives as often we fail to pay attention to other side of the story, since there is only one fixed way of story narration that has been traditionally told from time immemorial. The focus of the concept is to break the existing tradition of patriarchy and to submerge its assumptions and impositions. The old texts have impacted, influenced and shaped women and their psyche which has to be changed by revision of the literature.

Retellings validate the lost or unseen characters and bring them to forefront and make their voices to be heard. Basically retellings are the revival and renaissance in the mythological literature. The process of 'demythification' is the 'revisionist' usage of mythical narratives which means a myth-making approach wherein the elementary concepts are transformed. In simple terms this approach of mythology is to 'subvert' what is available and what has been practiced to date. It is re-reading and re-interpreting mythology with new lens. 'Revision' as the name suggests is revising the old or existing tales to make them apt for the contemporary issues of society. According to Adrienne Rich, "Revision is the act of seeing something over again from a different perspective". It also brings in scope to re-examine the past through various new lens and through which one can understand the motive behind the canonical representation of specific gender.

Another important strategy in the retellings of mythology is 'Refraction' as propounded by Andre Alphons Lefevere, an eminent writer of translation studies and comparative literature. The texts of retelling manipulate the literature to fit in a social background and to address the issues of the particular time frame. Lefevere has put forward an analytic tool of 'right reading' in the concept of refraction. He proposes that refraction helps the reader to identify the text as powerful as they are with a view to perpetuate and ensure 'right readings'. According to Lefevere,

Refraction is something that denotes the rewriting of texts (the production of plays) in order to make them acceptable for a new audience. In the process, virtually every feature of the original may be changed, or else very little may be changed. Changes will usually fall under three categories: a change of the language in which the original is written, with its concomitant socio-cultural context, a change of the ideology of the original (i.e., its 'word view' in the widest, not just the political sense of the word) and a change of the poetics of the original (i.e., the presuppositions as to what is, or is not, literature that can be seen to have guided the author of the original, whether he/she follows them or rebels against them).

### **Conclusion:**

It is very important to preserve the core essence and archetypes of the original myths and along with that to introduce a fresh perspective. It is remarkable to see that the myths have potential to provide alternative yet symbolic significations as per particular space and time. The nature of open-endedness of mythology incorporates varied re-interpretations and re-constructions that act as manual and inkling of ancient history and culture of India. It also gives space and a chance to the mythical characters to come out of the prefixed and canonical role and identity that they have been shown in since time immemorial. It also seeks out to revive the existing injustice and discrimination. However, the primary aim of retelling is to bring out the unheard and unseen characters and their story to the readers. Different and diverse interpretations and perspectives along with reflections in real life keep mythology alive to date.

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