



Unburdening Draupadi: Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking in Saniya Inamdar's *Panchaali: The Princess of Peace*

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Abstract

Mythological narratives have traditionally functioned as cultural instruments that reinforce gendered norms and patriarchal ideologies. Feminist revisionist mythmaking emerges as a literary strategy that reinterprets inherited myths from women's perspectives, recovering silenced voices and challenging androcentric representations. The study examines Saniya Inamdar's *Panchaali: The Princess of Peace* through Alicia Ostriker's theory of Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking. Adopting a qualitative textual and interpretive methodology, the study analyses five selected tenets of the theory: the confrontation and rectification of gender stereotypes, giving voice to the silenced female, the source myth as a partial and incomplete truth, challenging hegemonic patriarchal beliefs underlying source myths, and infusing myths with female knowledge and experience. The analysis demonstrates how Inamdar revises the *Mahabharata* by reconstructing Draupadi as an autonomous, reflective, and peace-oriented protagonist who resists patriarchal prescriptions and asserts her agency. Through the recovery of female subjectivity, the critique of patriarchal norms, and the incorporation of women lived experiences, the novel offers an alternative feminist vision of Draupadi that transcends conventional narratives of victimhood and revenge. The study concludes that *Panchaali: The Princess of Peace* exemplifies the transformative potential of feminist revisionist mythmaking and contributes to contemporary discussions on gender, mythology, agency, and literary revisionism.

Keywords: Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking; Draupadi; Saniya Inamdar; *Panchaali: The Princess of Peace*;

Alicia Ostriker

Introduction

Mythological narratives have long functioned as cultural repositories that shape collective understandings of gender, power, and social identity. However, these narratives have often been constructed through patriarchal perspectives that marginalize women's experiences and agency. Feminist revisionist mythmaking emerges as a critical literary strategy that revisits and reinterprets inherited myths to recover silenced female voices and challenge androcentric representations. Contemporary Indian writers have increasingly employed this approach to reimagine mythological women such as Sita, Surpanakha, and Draupadi, transforming them from passive figures into active agents of self-definition and resistance. While most Draupadi-centered retellings foreground her suffering, anger, and quest for justice, Saniya Inamdar's *Panchaali: The Princess of Peace* offers a distinctive reconfiguration of the character by emphasizing her role as a peace-builder, ethical leader, and visionary thinker. Through the lens of Alicia Ostriker's theory of Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking, this study examines how Inamdar revises the *Mahabharata* to construct an alternative feminist vision of Draupadi that transcends conventional narratives of victimhood and revenge. The study argues that the novel challenges patriarchal assumptions embedded in the source myth while foregrounding female agency, consent, ethical reasoning, and transformative leadership.

Review of Related Literature and Research Gap

Existing have explored how feminist retellings revise inherited mythological narratives to recover female agency. Puja and Nair examine the representation of Surpanakha in Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* and Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*, arguing that contemporary revisions transform a traditionally vilified character into a figure of autonomy and self-realisation. The study demonstrates how feminist retellings challenge patriarchal constructions and create alternative spaces for female identity formation (Puja and Nair).

Similarly, Anju E. A.'s study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* argues that revisionist mythmaking functions as a strategy for exposing the misogynistic foundations of androcentric mythology. By narrating the *Ramayana* through Sita's voice, Divakaruni reclaims female experience and contests the patriarchal silencing embedded in the epic tradition. The study emphasizes that feminist revisions fill the "gaps and silences" of canonical texts while redefining female identity and agency.

Scholarship on Draupadi-centered retellings has largely focused on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. Sharma and Kumar identify the novel as a prominent example of feminist revisionist mythmaking that reimagines the *Mahabharata* through Draupadi's perspective. According to the authors, the novel grants Draupadi narrative authority, emotional depth, and agency, thereby challenging the androcentric structure of the epic and foregrounding women's experiences within cultural storytelling.

Broader studies on feminist revisionism further contend that mythology functions as a cultural mechanism through which patriarchal ideologies are perpetuated. Consequently, feminist rewritings seek to recover suppressed female voices, challenge inherited stereotypes, and produce alternative narratives that foreground women's subjectivity and resistance.

Literary Scholarship on feminist revisionist mythmaking has predominantly examined the reinterpretation of mythological women such as Sita, Surpanakha, and Draupadi in the works of writers like Volga, Kavita Kane, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. These studies primarily focus on themes of female agency, resistance, identity formation, and the recovery of silenced voices within patriarchal narratives (Puja and Nair; Sharma and Kumar).

However, Saniya Inamdar's *Panchaali: The Princess of Peace* has received little scholarly attention within the framework of feminist revisionist mythmaking. More importantly, existing studies on Draupadi retellings largely emphasize her victimisation, anger, resistance, and quest for justice, while overlooking representations that foreground peace-building, ethical leadership, reconciliation, and transformative agency. Consequently, the ways in which Inamdar reconfigures Draupadi as a mediator, visionary, and advocate of peace remain underexplored.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining *Panchaali: The Princess of Peace* through the lens of feminist revisionist mythmaking. It investigates how Inamdar revises the *Mahabharata* to construct an alternative feminist vision of Draupadi that transcends conventional narratives of suffering and revenge, positioning her instead as a figure of diplomacy, compassion, and transformative leadership.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how Saniya Inamdar's *Panchaali: The Princess of Peace* confronts and rectifies patriarchal gender stereotypes associated with Draupadi in the canonical *Mahabharata*

2. To analyse how the novel gives voice to the traditionally silenced female subject by foregrounding Draupadi's thoughts, emotions, and perspectives
3. To investigate how Inamdar treats the source myth as a partial and incomplete truth and reconstructs alternative narratives that recover omitted female experiences
4. To explore how the novel challenges the hegemonic patriarchal beliefs and ideological structures embedded within the *Mahabharata*, particularly those concerning female consent, marriage, and agency
5. To evaluate how Inamdar infuses the myth with female knowledge and lived experience, thereby transforming the traditional narrative into a feminist reinterpretation of Draupadi's life
6. To assess the effectiveness of *Panchaali: The Princess of Peace* as a work of Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking through the application of Alicia Ostriker's theoretical framework

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The study adopts a qualitative textual and interpretive methodology to examine Saniya Inamdar's *Panchaali: The Princess of Peace*. The analysis is grounded in Alicia Ostriker's theory of Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking and focuses on five selected tenets: the confrontation and rectification of gender stereotypes, giving voice to the silenced female, the source myth as a partial and incomplete truth, challenging hegemonic patriarchal beliefs underlying source myths, and infusing myths with female knowledge and experience. Through close reading of the text, the study explores how Inamdar revises the *Mahabharata* to construct a feminist reimagining of Draupadi centred on agency, dignity, and transformative leadership.

Analysis of the Select Text

The Confrontation and Rectification of Gender Stereotypes

Ostriker's theory's soul lies in the argument that "the core of revisionist mythmaking for women poets lies in the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth" (Ostriker 73). In the epic *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is defined almost exclusively through her relationships to men around her. She is a daughter born to serve her father's revenge, a wife distributed among five brothers, an object staked in a dice game, and a woman disrobed in public. She remains crucially, passive in the narrative architecture of the

original myth. Inamdar systematically dismantles this passivity from the very first chapter of the novel. Panchaali refuses the epic's famous description of her as a beauty created for male desire:

"I fathomed I was beautiful, a beauty that generated wanton desires amongst men! I was dark, tall, and full-figured, and while beauty is associated with coy femininity, there was nothing effeminate about me. In my own polite way, I was forthright, honest, and earnest in expressing my opinions" (Inamdar ch. 1)

The stereotype of the passive, coyly feminine woman is directly contradicted. Panchaali is not coy; she is opinionated. This correction reaches its apex when she rejects the polyandrous marriage and this is where the novel departs most radically from the canonical text. In the Mahabharata, Draupadi accepts the polyandrous arrangement decreed by Kunti and sanctioned by sages. In Inamdar's version, Panchaali stands before the assembled court and refuses.

"Oh esteemed ones assembled together, I Princess Draupadi, with all respect, obey not to marry the five illustrious brothers! I agree to marry Prince Arjuna, who won my Swayamwara, or I will marry no one!" (Inamdar ch. 9)

The central corrective gesture of the novel is that the gender stereotype of female submission and compliance are overturned. Panchaali does not accept the logic by which a woman may be shared like property among men. Subsequent scholars like Mageed also support Ostriker's ideas of feminist revisionist mythmaking as it allows "to break through the confines of traditional gender roles and to correct a canonical legacy dominated by patriarchal values" (Mageed d661)

Giving Voice to the Silenced Female

Ostriker argues that "Where women write strongly as women, it is clear that their intention is to subvert and transform the life and literature they inherit." and also, they "invade the sanctuaries of language where our meanings for 'male' and 'female' are preserved" (Ostriker 211). The language of the Mahabharata is itself a patriarchal sanctuary, being authored by the sage Vyas, transmitted by male bards across time, and structured around male genealogies, male wars, and male honour. Women in the epic speak rarely and are rarely listened to. Inamdar's most radical formal decision is to give Panchaali the full architecture of the novel, not only plot but interiority, argumentation, and epistemology.

In the second chapter the very first extended conversation Panchaali has is not about her beauty or her purpose as a daughter, but about the nature of identity, belonging, and justice: “How do I respond to relationships and feelings when I'm still attempting to understand my identity, this new complicated world with multiple relationships and individual nuances?” (Inamdar ch. 2). Inamdar’s novel deliberately restore what the source myth erases: a woman’s interiority. It gives Panchaali space to ask questions of selfhood, desire, and meaning, breaking the silence of archetypes. Her existential voice becomes the axis of narrative, shifting her from mere object to subject.

The novel's most sustained act of invasion through language occurs in a legal argument delivered by Panchaali. She constructs a philosophical rebuttal of the polyandrous marriage, encompassing scripture, social psychology, personal memory, and ethical reasoning. The hidden bias is the court's unspoken assumption that Panchaali will simply comply, that a woman's consent is irrelevant where dharma and maternal command have already spoken. Panchaali names and refuses this assumption directly: “Tell me, Krishna, where is it written that to honour the words of one woman you rob the dignity of another woman!” (Inamdar ch 10). She speaks here not just for herself but for the fact that a women's dignity cannot be the casualty of patriarchy’s honour arrangements. Inamdar portrayal of Panchaali breaks the sanctuary of patriarchal language in which a women's silence as natural.

The Source Myth as Only a Partial (and Incomplete) Truth

In *Stealing the Language*, Ostriker argues that revisionist mythmaking treats inherited myths as “only a fraction of a much larger truth that the revised text attempts to tell” (Ostriker 235–38). The canonical narrative functions merely as “fence posts surrounding the terrain of mythic truth” rather than as truth itself. This process corresponds to her earlier description of revisionist mythmaking as the appropriation of “the old vessel” to be “filled with new wine,” thereby transforming inherited cultural forms into vehicles for feminist reinterpretation (Ostriker 72).

This tenet is embedded in the very structural logic of Inamdar’s work. The novel does not retell the Mahabharata rather it moves alongside it, revealing what the canonical text could not or would not narrate, the inner life of the woman at its centre.

Draupadi has recurring prophetic dreams of the disrobing and the famous dice-game scene even before it ever occurs in her life. She sees “gold” and the derogatory term hurled at a woman in a court, before she has any idea this woman is herself. The dream sequence literalises Ostriker's tenet: the canonical myth gives only the public spectacle (the disrobing), while Inamdar's revision insists that there is a vastly larger truth that exists. The interior experience of a woman who saw her own violation coming and tried, desperately, to prevent it from happening. It is the fragment of a woman's lifetime of dread and courage that the Mahabharata simply omitted.

Similarly, in the chapter thirteen Panchaali surveys the lineage of the war from Shantanu and Satyawati to Shakuni to the Pandavas and Kauravas. Her perspective reveals that Draupadi was not the cause of the Mahabharata, as she is so often blamed: “The Mahabharata happened without its main accused. Draupadi would never blame Panchaali for the war and neither would history” (Inamdar ch.13). The epic’s partial truth which assigns Draupadi a causal role in catastrophe is here corrected by a fuller truth that the war had its roots in male ego, patriarchal succession disputes, and human folly long before Draupadi was even born.

Challenging the Hegemonic Patriarchal Beliefs Underlying Source Myths

Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking emphasises the use of the source myth as "a base on which to build a new point of view" (Ostriker 235–38). Through this process, revisionist texts move beyond character revision to critique the ideological foundations of the original narrative, particularly the patriarchal assumptions that govern its representation of gender.

In the novel the hegemonic patriarchal belief most relentlessly challenged is the institution of polyandry-as-duty. The assumption that a woman's body and conjugal life are properly determined by male authority: a father's strategic ambitions, a mother-in-law's casual order, a sage's theological endorsement.

Draupadi confronts her brother's passive acceptance of the arrangement and exposes the ideological scaffolding behind it: "What you cannot shout out loud is something you want me to be called out in a court full of men! Don't you understand Dhri, I've been called a prostitute... is called an unchaste woman in our scriptures" (Inamdar ch. 11). She identifies here the patriarchal belief system and the scriptural legitimization of male polygamy alongside the condemnation of female polyandry and refusing to accept it as natural or just.

Infusing Myths with Female Knowledge and Female Experience

Ostriker argues that in revisionist mythmaking "the old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy" (73). Through this process, inherited myths are transformed into vehicles for articulating women's experiences and perspectives.

Inamdar accomplishes this through an almost total focalization of the narrative through Draupadi's embodied female knowledge. Her experience of menarche, for instance, is given careful attention in her dream sequence: "I gradually understood the transformation of a child to a girl to a woman! Faced with the monthly cycle, I learnt it was a gradual transformation of a female from a girl to a woman, from a human to the begetter of another human! Experiencing my menarche, I was now as human as I was divine because of my birth!" (Inamdar ch. 3). This is female experience entirely absent from the Mahabharata from and other male-authored text, as it is irrelevant to the male fantasy of female divinity.

Conclusion

Through the lens of Alicia Ostriker's Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking, *Panchaali: The Princess of Peace* emerges as a significant feminist reinterpretation of the *Mahabharata*. The novel confronts and rectifies traditional gender stereotypes, restores voice and agency to the silenced female figure of Draupadi, re-examines the source myth as an incomplete truth, challenges the patriarchal ideologies embedded within the epic, and infuses the narrative with female knowledge and experience. In doing so, Inamdar moves beyond conventional portrayals of Draupadi as merely a victim or catalyst of conflict and reconstructs her as an autonomous, reflective, and peace-oriented leader.

The analysis further reveals that Inamdar's revision is not limited to character reconstruction but extends to a broader ideological critique of the social and cultural assumptions that have historically shaped Draupadi's representation. By foregrounding consent, dignity, ethical reasoning, and self-determination, the novel reclaims spaces traditionally denied to women within mythological narratives. Moreover, the text demonstrates how feminist retellings can transform inherited myths into sites of resistance, negotiation, and empowerment. Consequently, *Panchaali: The Princess of Peace* not only exemplifies the principles of

feminist revisionist mythmaking but also contributes a distinctive perspective to contemporary mythological fiction by presenting Draupadi as a symbol of peace, reconciliation, and feminist agency.

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