



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

From Monolithic Myth to Biopolitical Mosaic: The Biopolitics of Caste, Gender, and Sovereignty In Contemporary Indian Mythological Fiction.

Mr. Naba Moni Saikia

Ph.D. Research Scholar, MSSV, ASSAM

&

Assistant Professor, English

B.H.B. College, Sarupeta

Dr. Dipak Jyoti Baruah

Professor, English Dept.

MSSV, ASSAM

Abstract

This paper looks at how some contemporary Indian mythological fiction rewrites against the epic as a dominant narrative by making use of the Foucauldian notion of biopower. Drawing on the work of Rita Felski, Terry Eagleton, and Jörg Dünne and Christian Moser's concept of textual power, it can be argued that *Asura: The Tale of the Vanquished* by Anand Neelakantan, *Karna: The Unsung Hero of the Mahabharata* by Umesh Kotru and Ashutosh Zutshi, *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You* and *The Pregnant King* by Devdutt Pattanaik are subversive not just independently but also collectively in having dismantled monolithic norms revolving around identity formations such as caste, gender, and sovereignty inherent in foundational epic narratives. Through the study of Karna's disputed "Suta" identity and the Asura-Deva separation in the works, such structures are exposed as biopolitical instruments of control on caste hierarchies. At the same time, in Pattanaik's narratives, the questioning of gender binaries and reproductive control exposes how gender operates as biopower to sustain political order. The representation of kingship shows sovereignty as more population governance, under discipline regimes than divine justice. Through this research, a humble attempt has been made to contribute to the scholarly understanding of mythological fiction as a critical theory engaging with caste, gender, and sovereignty through the lens of "biopower".

Keywords: Biopower, Indian Mythology, Caste, Gender, Sovereignty, Counter-narratives

Introduction

Building on the Foucauldian concept of biopower, contemporary Indian mythological fiction critically intervenes in the traditional narratives of classical epics by revealing the sophisticated regulatory frameworks that underpin caste, gender, and sovereignty. These texts operate beyond simple storytelling, articulating complex critiques of social and political structures through a biopolitical lens that emphasizes the management, normalization, and control of life. By reclaiming characters such as Karna, Ravana, and Shikhandi, these retellings expose the epics' role as instruments of social discipline that naturalize hierarchical caste orders, enforce normative gender binaries, and legitimize sovereign power. This theoretical engagement suggests that classical epics are not just cultural artifacts but biopolitical texts that enact power over populations by regulating who is included or excluded from political and social belonging. This framework allows us to map how mythological fiction serves as both a product and critique of deeply embedded political technologies that have historically governed bodies, identities, and social status in India.

Further, these contemporary narratives position Indian mythology as a dynamic intellectual arena where myth serves as a site of political contestation and resistance, rather than a fixed repository of "dharmic" truths. The deployment of biopower in these narratives challenges the monolithic interpretation of epics as sanctified texts and reframes them as contested terrains where identities and social orders are continuously negotiated. By engaging with broader discourses on social justice, postcolonial identity, and political power, these works contribute to reimagining Indian mythology not only as literary heritage but as an active force shaping contemporary debates around caste, gender, and sovereignty. Through this lens, the paper highlights how mythological fiction enacts critical theory in practice, offering new modes of understanding and resisting biopolitical domination. This expands scholarly conversation by integrating literary analysis with postcolonial biopolitics, revealing the transformative potential of these retellings to influence cultural and political thought in India and beyond.

Objective:

The objectives of the paper are:

- To study how current mythological fiction in India revisits ancient epics from the perspective of biopower, thereby uncovering the structural forms of domination and regulation inherent in them.
- To study how caste, gender, and sovereignty are formed and sustained as biopolitical tools through these literary works.
- To understand how specific literary texts deconstruct established epical discourses through their alternative narrative modes that undermine identity hierarchies.
- To study the function of mythological reinterpretations as radical critiques that dismantle normative systems that guide social and political conduct.

- To contribute to the study of mythological fiction as an applied critical theory dealing with postcolonial themes of power, identity, and social justice.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative intertextual and thematic analysis approach to selected contemporary Indian mythological texts. Drawing primarily on Foucauldian biopower theory, the analysis closely reads specific narrative choices and character portrayals to uncover how caste identities, gender norms, and sovereign power structures are deconstructed and reimagined. Thematic coding categorizes instances of biopolitical control manifested through caste hierarchies, reproductive governance, and sovereign authority. The research engages with secondary scholarship on postcolonial feminism, queer theory, and mythology studies to contextualize the counter-narratives.

Discussion

The analysis of caste as a biopolitical strategy within these contemporary retellings foregrounds the epics as complex documents where social exclusion and population regulation intersect. Unlike traditional scholarly treatments that treat caste as primarily a social or religious category, this chapter's biopolitical reading reveals caste as an instrumentality of managing life and death within the mythopolitical order. Karna's liminal "Suta" status is not merely a narrative of personal tragedy but emblematic of how the epics operate to sustain stratified populations by delineating bodies deemed "fit" and "unfit" for power and inclusion. The demonization of the Asuras similarly confirms the deployment of myth to authorize biopolitical control over subaltern groups, transforming them into expendable "othered" bodies. This discussion contributes to expanding existing interpretations by situating caste within Foucauldian techniques of biopower, reflecting the ways social hierarchies govern not only culture but corporeal life and social belonging in the Indian postcolonial imaginary.

The interrogation of gender and sexuality through *The Pregnant King* and *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales* offers a critical extension of biopower's reproductive and normative functions. These narratives expose how mythological traditions have historically regulated bodies and reproduction through enforced binary genders and heteronormative reproductive roles to stabilize political sovereignty. By centering gender nonconforming and queer figures, these texts enact a counter-biopolitical resistance that disrupts reproductive governance, questioning who is allowed biological and social legitimacy. This approach illustrates a broader theoretical contribution wherein biopower is not a unidirectional imposition but contested through embodied practices and textual reimaginings. Such counter-narratives exemplify mythological fiction's potential to challenge hegemonic orders by reconstructing the biopolitical parameters of life, gender, and desire.

Sovereignty as biopolitical governance emerges as a significant theme by shifting focus from divine monarchy to the mechanisms of population control underpinning kingship in these retellings. The figures of Ravana, Yuvanashva, and Karna exemplify sovereignty that exercises disciplinary power over bodies and populations rather than emanating from sacred right. This reconceptualization aligns with recent

scholarly trends emphasizing sovereignty's dependence on biopolitical regulation, whereby power functions through managing birth, death, and identity to enforce social order. The discussion enriches theoretical understandings of myth and political power by demonstrating how contemporary fiction unpacks monarchic authority to reveal its foundational reliance on biopolitical technologies of control. This insight underscores mythology's continued relevance as a site for exploring governance, power, and resistance in postcolonial contexts.

The Biopolitics of Caste: The Management of Life through Social Hierarchies

Caste, as depicted in the classical epics, functions as a key site of biopower in Indian mythology, organizing populations into hierarchies that regulate life chances, social belonging, and political rights. Neelakantan's *Asura* and Kotru and Zutshi's *Karna* foreground caste identities as biopolitical strategies that codify exclusion and inclusion within the mythic socio-political order.

Karna's identity as a "Suta," the son of a charioteer caste, marks him as an exemplar of biopolitical marginality. Although born to royal lineage, Karna's caste position renders him socially illegitimate, a biopolitical exclusion that governs his access to power, honor, and community belonging. His liminal caste status subjects him to social stigma and limits his political agency, representing how caste functions as a regulatory technology over individual and collective life. This social stratification is not merely a matter of cultural prejudice but a biopolitical tool that manages populations by dictating who is worthy of life-enhancing privileges and who is subjected to social death or marginalization.

Similarly, *Asura* retells the epic from the perspective of the demon king Ravana and the Asuras, traditionally depicted as enemies of the Devas (gods). This binary – Asura/Daitya versus Deva – metaphorically represents caste and ethnic hierarchies, where the "monsters" are destabilized as subhuman or evil populations to be controlled or eradicated. This designation enacts biopolitical power by constructing boundaries around populations, legitimizing violence and exclusion as necessary for the "health" and purity of the ruling population. The demonization of Asuras acts as a form of population management that mirrors casteist ideologies in contemporary India, revealing the epics as sites where biopolitical techniques are mythologized and naturalized.

Both texts reveal how caste is not a static cultural identity but a dynamic technology of biopower that governs bodies and populations for social control. The biopolitical lens exposes how caste, embedded within mythology, functions to regulate, normalize, and perpetuate power hierarchies, managing life to protect dominant social orders.

The Biopolitics of Gender and Sexuality: Governing Bodies and Reproduction

Building on the analysis of caste, Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* and *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You* shift the focus to the biopolitics of gender and sexuality, exploring how these narratives reveal the regulatory mechanisms controlling bodies, reproduction, and sexual identities within mythological discourse.

The Pregnant King centers on Yuvanashva, a king who becomes pregnant, disrupting the normative association between reproduction and female bodies. This narrative challenges the gender binary and questions the sovereign control over reproductive capabilities, highlighting how reproduction is politicized as a site of biopower. The control of reproductive bodies underpins population management; wherein gendered norms enforce heteronormativity and reproductive labor as essential to maintaining the social order.

Similarly, *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales* bring to the fore narratives of transgender, intersex, and queer figures within mythology, countering dominant heteropatriarchal constructions. Shikhandi, born female but living as male, embodies a queer disruption of the gender binary, posing a challenge to sovereign biopolitical controls over sexuality and gender identity. These narratives illustrate how gender policing functions biopolitically to regulate not only bodies but also desire and social roles, reinforcing political order through normative sexual and gender classifications.

Through these representations, Pattanaik's works demonstrate the biopolitical control of life as intricately tied to reproductive regimes and the enforcement of binary gender norms. By destabilizing these norms, the texts articulate a counter-biopolitics that resists hegemonic governance of bodies and reproduction, opening spaces for alternative existences and identities.

The Biopolitics of Sovereignty: Kingship as Population Management

Finally, this chapter examines the biopolitics of sovereignty as portrayed in these mythological retellings. Sovereignty, traditionally understood as divine right, is reconfigured as a regime of biopolitical governance that manages populations through mechanisms of control, discipline, and regulatory power.

In *Asura*, Ravana is portrayed not simply as a tyrannical despot but as a sovereign whose rule is fundamentally about managing life, death, and reproduction to sustain his kingdom's population. His sovereignty functions through normative enforcement and surveillance indicative of disciplinary power, highlighting sovereignty's biopolitical dimension rather than divine absolutism. Likewise, Yuvanashva's transgressive kingship in *The Pregnant King* foregrounds the biopolitics of sovereignty by demonstrating how reproductive capabilities intersect with political authority. Yuvanashva's pregnancy complicates the traditional sovereign figure, revealing the vulnerability and constructedness of sovereign power in relation to biopolitical populations. In the Kaurava court context of *Karna*, sovereignty is also a site of biopolitical negotiation, where the legitimacy of rulers is intertwined with managing their subjects' lives, rights, and deaths. *Karna*'s contested position highlights how sovereign power is exercised through exclusion and inclusion, reproducing social hierarchies that govern the population's biological and social existence.

This critical mapping of sovereignty as biopolitical governance challenges normative assumptions about kingship as divinely sanctioned, reframing it as an apparatus that exercises power over life, regulates

populations, and sustains political order through mechanisms of control and discipline rather than sacred right.

Conclusion

These contemporary mythological counter-narratives form a biopolitical mosaic that fundamentally challenges the “dharmic” legitimacy of classical Indian epics by unveiling the underlying power dynamics embedded in caste, gender, and sovereignty. Traditionally, the epics have been framed as sacred texts that justify social hierarchies and political authority through the notion of dharma, a cosmic and moral order. However, these new literary interventions deconstruct such monolithic interpretations by exposing the epics as arenas where biopolitical power is exercised to regulate bodies, identities, and populations. By reinterpreting characters like Karna, Shikhandi, and Ravana through the lens of biopower, these texts highlight how caste functions as a mechanism of social exclusion and hierarchical population management, gender norms operate as reproductive and disciplinary controls, and sovereignty manifests as practices of governance aimed at managing life rather than divine sanction. This turning point in Indian mythological fiction not only destabilizes the canonical narrative but also initiates a dialogue that engages with questions of social justice, identity politics, and political critique in contemporary India. By foregrounding these counter-narratives, the texts open new interpretive spaces where the epics are apprehended not as fixed, sacred chronicles but as contested, dynamic documents that mirror ongoing struggles over power and belonging.

Moreover, this collective literary movement enacts a broader deconstruction, critiquing and reimagining Indian mythology as a vibrant intellectual field of resistance and political engagement. The chapter’s biopolitical framework reveals mythology as a site where power is both enacted and contested, thereby enriching scholarly discourse on postcolonial biopolitics and myth studies. Contemporary retellings articulate a mosaic of perspectives that resist homogeneity, reflecting India’s complex social stratifications and cultural negotiations. They disrupt dominant knowledge systems that have naturalized exclusionary hierarchies, proposing alternative imaginaries that affirm marginalized identities and experiences. These counter-narratives exemplify how mythology remains relevant not merely as heritage or literature but as a potent tool for critical reflection on governance, identity, and agency in a postcolonial context. Thus, the paper emphasizes the transformative potential of biopolitical analysis to reposition Indian mythological fiction as a dynamic realm of political contestation, underscoring its role in the ongoing negotiation and renegotiation of power relations in contemporary society.

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