

## Mythopolitics and Identity Formation: Reimagining Epic Narratives in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Indian English Fiction

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### Abstract-

In the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Indian English literary sphere, mythology is undergoing a significant revival—not as static reverence for the past, but as a dynamic space of political dialogue and identity reconstruction. Contemporary writers are reimagining foundational epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* not merely as religious or cultural touchstones, but as living, adaptable narratives that can interrogate and challenge entrenched power structures. These modern literary interventions—often framed within the discourse of “mythopolitics”—strategically deploy myth to engage with pressing socio-political concerns, including caste hierarchies, gender inequality, regional marginalisation, and the complexities of individual subjectivity. By decentering canonical interpretations and shifting narrative focus to overlooked or vilified figures such as Ravana, Sita, or Karna, these works offer a radical rearticulation of identity within a mythic framework. This paper examines how selected Indian English novels utilise epic retellings to lend voice to subaltern experiences, recasting myth as both a repository of cultural memory and a tool of ideological disruption. Far from being passive rewritings, these narratives actively dismantle hegemonic norms, reclaiming myth as a contested space where historical silences are filled with new voices and perspectives. In doing so, authors not only preserve the imaginative grandeur of myth but also politicise it—transforming it into a literary mechanism for resistance, critique, and empowerment. The abstract explores how this dual function of myth—its preservation and politicisation—makes it a fertile ground for both continuity and transformation in postcolonial Indian consciousness. Myth, therefore, is no longer the domain of deities and dharma alone; it becomes a narrative crucible where collective and personal identities are renegotiated, memory is restructured, and tradition becomes a site of radical possibility.

### Keywords:

Mythopolitics, Identity, Epic Rewriting, Indian English Fiction, Cultural Memory, Subversion, Postcolonial Myth, Feminist Mythology, Ravana, Sita, Hybrid Narratives

## **Introduction-**

Myth has long served as the symbolic and intellectual foundation of Indian cultural consciousness. Far from being mere repositories of divine tales or heroic exploits, myths have historically encoded deeply ingrained norms of social behaviour, moral instruction, gender roles, and political legitimacy. In the evolving landscape of 21st-century Indian English fiction, however, myth is being recontextualised—not as a relic of reverence, but as a pliable, potent narrative device capable of interrogating power and reclaiming identity. Contemporary Indian writers are engaging mythology not to preserve orthodoxy, but to challenge it. Through acts of literary reimagination, they confront the silences, exclusions, and hierarchies embedded in canonical epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. This emergent phenomenon, often referred to as **"mythopolitics,"** signals a shift from sacred storytelling to political and philosophical critique. Writers are no longer content with inherited myths; they rewrite them to question whose voices have been amplified and whose have been erased. In doing so, they open narrative space for historically marginalised identities—Dalit, feminist, queer, and regional—to articulate agency within and beyond mythological frameworks.

The works of Anand Neelakantan, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, and Amish Tripathi exemplify this mythopolitical turn. Their characters—Ravana, Sita, Karna, Draupadi—are no longer flat archetypes constrained by dichotomies of dharma and adharma. Instead, they are rendered as complex individuals wrestling with injustice, exclusion, desire, and ethical ambiguity. These figures are reframed to reflect the plural and contested nature of identity in contemporary India. Their struggles mirror real-world dynamics of caste oppression, gender marginalisation, and regional underrepresentation. The literary myth becomes a cultural battlefield where memory is negotiated, social structures are re-examined, and agency is reclaimed. This emphasis on the role of myth in giving voice to marginalized groups fosters empathy towards the struggles of these groups.

Thus, mythopolitics operates as both a literary strategy and a cultural intervention. It challenges the myth of myth's neutrality and exposes its historical complicity in preserving hegemonic ideologies. By transforming epic narratives into dialogic spaces—where tradition and dissent coexist—Indian English fiction bridges the mythical past with the political present. It asserts that mythology is not ahistorical, apolitical, or sacrosanct. Instead, it is an ever-evolving narrative matrix through which identities are constructed, contested, and sometimes liberated. In this context, the rewriting of epics is not mere revisionism; it is a transformative

act of cultural authorship, one that redefines what it means to remember, resist, and reimagine in postcolonial India.

### **Myth as Political Narrative: The Idea of Mythopolitics**

In contemporary Indian English fiction, myth is increasingly being reclaimed not as a sacrosanct archive of timeless truths but as a contested political terrain where narratives are rewritten, identities renegotiated, and hierarchies dismantled. The term *mythopolitics* captures this transformative practice—one in which mythology is not revered passively but interrogated actively. Far from being neutral cultural memory, myths are now understood as ideological instruments that historically shaped collective consciousness and legitimised systems of caste, patriarchy, and religious orthodoxy. In this revised literary landscape, 21st-century authors employ myth as a narrative strategy to subvert the very power structures they critique. Through creative reimaginings of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, writers expose the constructed nature of 'dharma' and righteousness, unveiling the profound social inequalities embedded within traditional epic frameworks. This active interrogation of mythology in contemporary Indian English fiction stimulates us intellectually with the critical engagement with tradition.

Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* exemplifies this narrative reversal by shifting the epic lens from the victors to the vanquished. Ravana, once vilified as the archetype of evil, is humanised as a thoughtful leader whose downfall was not due to sin but to political marginalisation and ideological difference. This recasting dismantles the binary opposition of good versus evil, inviting readers to examine the politics of canonisation critically. Similarly, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* offers a counter-narrative to the *Ramayana* by giving voice to Sita—not as the silent, dutiful consort, but as an emotionally complex woman asserting agency in a patriarchal cosmos. These novels demonstrate how myth, when re-approached through subaltern or feminist perspectives, can become a space of radical narrative justice. The term 'subaltern' here refers to the marginalized or oppressed groups in society. By foregrounding voices historically excluded from epic retellings, these works reclaim mythology as a democratic site where alternative worldviews are not only possible but necessary for an inclusive cultural imagination.

Mythopolitics, therefore, is not just about retelling stories of gods, kings, or moral ideals; it is a deeper epistemological project concerned with memory, erasure, and representation. It interrogates whose histories are remembered and whose have been systematically silenced. Through this lens, literature emerges as an active battleground—where

tradition meets rebellion, where authority is questioned, and where myth becomes a mechanism for unveiling historical inequalities. By infusing mythology with contemporary concerns such as caste-based oppression, gender dynamics, and regional identity, mythopolitical fiction critiques the cultural selectivity that has shaped dominant Indian historiographies. The epics cease to be unchanging blueprints of ideal behaviour and become dynamic texts open to reinterpretation, filled with tensions, contradictions, and suppressed narratives.

Moreover, mythopolitics serves as a powerful tool for subaltern reclamation. Marginalised groups—Dalits, women, tribal communities, and regional minorities—find in these retellings a means of re-entering cultural discourse from which they have long been excluded. These authors strategically dismantle the hegemony of “official” myths and offer what can be called *counter-myths*—versions of the epic that challenge centralised authority and hegemonic morality. This mythic insurgency enables readers to engage with mythology as an evolving field of contestation rather than as a frozen archive of divine wisdom. In doing so, it destabilises the notion of myth as universally valid or morally absolute, and instead presents it as historically contingent and open to transformation. Thus, the mythopolitical turn in Indian English fiction reclaims mythology as a living discourse—capable of both conserving cultural memory and catalysing political change.

### **Identity Formation and the Role of the Epic**

In postcolonial Indian English literature, epic narratives such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are no longer regarded as fixed repositories of divine heroism or moral absolutism; instead, they are increasingly employed as fluid cultural texts through which identity is deconstructed, reconstructed, and contested. These epics, long enshrined as vehicles of collective cultural memory, are now being reimagined to reflect the diversity, fragmentation, and tensions that mark contemporary Indian society. Within this framework, identity is not a static inheritance but a site of continual negotiation—shaped by regional affiliations, linguistic plurality, caste hierarchies, gender roles, and socio-political transformations. Writers operating within this mythopolitical mode engage the epic as a liminal space where the personal and the political converge, allowing characters and communities to challenge the authority of inherited tradition while still drawing upon its symbolic power. The epic becomes a narrative mirror, reflecting not only the ideals of dharma and duty but also the undercurrents of marginalisation, exclusion, and rebellion. Identity, in this context, is rendered as both historically conditioned and imaginatively rearticulated.

A striking example of this transformation is evident in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*, where the divine is humanised and myth is recontextualised within a socio-political framework. Shiva is no longer a distant god residing in mythic abstraction; he is recast as a tribal warrior navigating caste exclusion, regional discrimination, and political manipulation. His journey, marked by moral dilemmas and transformative choices, speaks to the fluid and constructed nature of identity—one that resists deterministic notions of birth and fate. Similarly, Dalit writers like O.V. Vijayan and Kalyan Rao reclaim the epic from the perspective of the historically silenced. Their narratives challenge the casteist underpinnings of epic authority, exposing the Brahmanical codes embedded in traditional retellings of the epic. These reinterpretations subvert the assumed universality of myth and offer counter-memories that articulate the identity of the oppressed—not merely through victimhood, but through agency, critique, and imagination. In these stories, myth is not dismissed but decolonised; it is made responsive to lived experience.

Moreover, identity in these texts is intricately woven with acts of storytelling and remembrance. The very act of retelling becomes a political one—one that contests official histories and opens up space for alternative genealogies of belonging. By re-narrating the epic through diverse lenses—feminist, Dalit, regional, or queer—contemporary authors reshape the epic as a dynamic field of identity politics. These mythic rewritings expose the fissures within dominant cultural memory and provide literary legitimacy to identities that have historically been excluded. Thus, the role of the epic in modern Indian fiction goes far beyond moral instruction or spiritual allegory; it becomes an arena of cultural reconfiguration, where history is questioned, identity is fluid, and literature becomes a site of liberation.

### **Language, Style, and Symbolism**

The language and stylistic strategies employed in mythopolitical Indian English fiction serve as a conscious negotiation between inherited tradition and emergent critique, between reverence for the sacred and resistance to its exclusivity. These texts do not simply translate myths into modern prose; they transform them by forging a hybrid linguistic register that mirrors the complexities of contemporary Indian identity. Authors frequently weave together Sanskritic grandeur, regional idioms, and contemporary English to create a textual voice that is at once rooted and radical. This linguistic blending is not just an aesthetic device, but a political one, reflecting the layered and often contradictory nature of postcolonial subjectivity. The grandeur of epical expression often coexists with colloquial speech patterns, thereby



collapsing hierarchies between the classical and the everyday, between canonical knowledge and lived experience. Moreover, indigenous cultural motifs—such as ritual practices, mythic allegories, and references to Vedic cosmology—are embedded within the narrative fabric, imbuing the works with an authenticity that resists homogenised Western literary forms. This stylistic hybridity not only makes myth accessible to a modern readership but also foregrounds the multiple registers of cultural identity that mythopolitical fiction seeks to interrogate.

Narrative structure is another critical element through which mythopolitical novels subvert traditional epic conventions. Authors often abandon linear storytelling in favour of fragmented timelines, polyphonic voices, and deep interiority, reflecting the psychological and political ruptures of contemporary Indian society. By granting mythological figures—such as Sita, Ravana, or Karna—an inner voice, these works dismantle the moral absolutism and singularity of purpose often found in traditional epics. Through interior monologue, characters are given emotional and psychological complexity, transforming them from symbolic archetypes into introspective beings engaged in existential and ethical questioning. Fragmented narratives further reflect the disjunctions of memory, history, and identity in a postcolonial context, forcing readers to reconstruct the story from multiple, often conflicting, perspectives. This disruption of epic linearity is emblematic of the broader political project of mythopolitics—it resists closure, resists singular truths, and instead insists upon narrative multiplicity as a form of democratic engagement. The act of reading becomes participatory, inviting the audience to interpret, connect, and challenge the inherited meanings of these mythic tales.

Symbolism remains a central pillar of mythopolitical fiction, providing continuity with the epic past while simultaneously embedding new meanings that resonate with the present. Traditional epic motifs—such as exile, fire, blindness, and war—are strategically recontextualised to reflect modern socio-political anxieties. Draupadi's disrobing, for instance, becomes a powerful metaphor not only for her violation but for the broader experiences of systemic humiliation endured by women across centuries and cultures. Similarly, Ram's exile is transformed into a symbol of dislocation, of ethical exile from a just society, or even of alienation from one's inner moral compass. Ravana's fall ceases to be a simplistic defeat of evil and instead becomes a narrative of marginalised resistance crushed by hegemonic power. These reinterpretations enable epic symbols to serve as both cultural memory and political commentary, thereby bridging temporal and ideological divides.

Furthermore, the prose often carries a ritualistic rhythm—echoing the cadence of oral traditions from which these myths were originally passed down. This poetic resonance

intensifies the emotional and spiritual dimensions of the narrative, blurring the boundary between sacred and profane, between divine allegory and human struggle. Ultimately, the use of language, form, and symbol in mythopolitical fiction reinforces its central thesis: that myth is not a static relic but a living, dynamic force capable of illuminating the fractures and possibilities of identity in a pluralistic, postcolonial world.

### **Conclusion-**

Mythopolitics in contemporary Indian English fiction signifies more than a literary trend—it marks a transformative cultural movement that actively redefines the roles of mythology and identity within the framework of modern Indian consciousness. No longer are myths approached as untouchable relics or monolithic truths handed down through unquestioned tradition. Instead, they are dissected, challenged, and reanimated to reflect the diverse realities of caste, gender, regionality, and individual agency. These reconfigurations expose the selective memory embedded in dominant mythological narratives, revealing how epic storytelling has historically perpetuated social hierarchies and silenced alternative voices. Authors such as Anand Neelakantan, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, and Amish Tripathi transcend conventional retellings to reconstruct epic figures like Ravana, Sita, Karna, and Draupadi as embodiments of rebellion, suffering, and existential agency. Their literary interventions allow readers to encounter mythology not as a static archive but as an evolving arena of dialogue, resistance, and redefinition. Through such mythopolitical reimaginings, identity formation becomes a dynamic act—a continuous negotiation between memory and erasure, selfhood and society, tradition and transgression. These works employ stylistic hybridity, fragmented narration, and dense symbolism to mirror the fractured yet plural nature of contemporary Indian identity. By combining the sacred cadence of epic memory with the disruptive voice of postcolonial critique, the texts open a dialogic space where inherited stories are interrogated and made porous to subaltern experiences. In this context, myth becomes both a site of continuity and a crucible of transformation, enabling literature to serve as a political and cultural intervention. The conclusion that emerges is clear: mythopolitics offers a new grammar of storytelling—one that empowers the marginalised, destabilises hegemonic norms, and reclaims cultural heritage as a space of multiplicity and meaning-making. In reimagining epics not as instruments of cultural conformity but as tools of liberation and inclusion, contemporary Indian English fiction challenges its readers to reflect on whose truths endure,

whose voices are heard, and what kind of futures can be imagined when myth is reclaimed not for preservation alone, but for participation, resistance, and renewal.

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