

## **Many Voices, One Epic: Intertextuality in Devdutt Pattanaik's Ramayana Narratives**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Ramayana, one of the foundational epics of Indian civilization, has been retold across centuries in diverse cultural, linguistic, and ideological contexts. In contemporary literary discourse, intertextuality has emerged as a critical framework for understanding how modern authors reinterpret canonical texts. This paper examines intertextuality in the works of Devdutt Pattanaik, focusing on *The Book of Ram, Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, and *My Hanuman Chalisa*.

The study explores how Pattanaik constructs a dialogic narrative space where multiple versions of the Ramayana coexist, intersect, and challenge one another. Drawing on theories of intertextuality, particularly those articulated by Julia Kristeva and post-structuralist critics, the paper argues that Pattanaik's retellings do not merely reproduce the epic but actively reinterpret it through contemporary lenses of gender, ethics, and cultural identity.

Through a close reading of his texts, this research demonstrates that Pattanaik's narratives foreground plurality, decentralize narrative authority, and invite readers to engage with mythology as an evolving discourse rather than a fixed tradition. Ultimately, the paper positions Pattanaik's work as a significant contribution to the ongoing transformation of myth in modern literature.

### **Keywords**

Intertextuality, Ramayana, Devdutt Pattanaik, Mythology, Retelling, Feminism, Cultural Studies, Narrative Plurality, Indian Literature

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Ramayana has existed not as a singular, fixed narrative but as a fluid and evolving tradition shaped by cultural reinterpretations. From the Sanskrit epic attributed to Valmiki to regional adaptations and modern literary retellings, the Ramayana exemplifies what scholars describe as a "network of narratives" rather than a single authoritative text. This multiplicity aligns closely with the concept of intertextuality, which views texts as interconnected systems influenced by prior narratives and cultural discourses.

The term intertextuality, introduced by Julia Kristeva, challenges the notion of textual autonomy by asserting that every text is shaped by its relationship with other texts. As literary theorists argue, "texts are formed as a result of the recurrence and transformation of other textual forms". In this framework, the Ramayana becomes not merely a story but a dynamic tradition continuously reinterpreted across time and space.

In contemporary Indian literature, Devdutt Pattanaik has emerged as a prominent figure in mythological retellings. His works reinterpret ancient narratives for modern audiences, emphasizing accessibility, plurality, and philosophical reflection. As scholars note, Pattanaik's writing transforms myth into "accessible and thought-provoking narratives" that bridge tradition and modernity .

Pattanaik's Ramayana-based texts—*The Book of Ram*, *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, and *My Hanuman Chalisa*—are particularly significant for their intertextual richness. Rather than presenting a singular version of the epic, these works incorporate multiple interpretations, regional variations, and symbolic meanings. Pattanaik himself emphasizes that the Ramayana is repeatedly retold because it serves as a framework for understanding social concepts such as kinship, morality, and identity .

This paper argues that Pattanaik's narratives exemplify intertextuality through three key strategies:

1. **Integration of multiple Ramayana traditions**
2. **Reinterpretation of characters through contemporary perspectives**
3. **Dialogic engagement with cultural and philosophical discourses**

By analyzing these strategies, the study demonstrates how Pattanaik's works transform the Ramayana into a pluralistic and evolving narrative that resonates with modern readers.

## DISCUSSION

### 1. Intertextuality as Narrative Foundation

Intertextuality is not merely a stylistic feature in Pattanaik's work but a foundational principle. His narratives explicitly acknowledge the existence of multiple Ramayanas, thereby rejecting the idea of a singular, authoritative version. This aligns with broader scholarly perspectives that view the Ramayana as a tradition characterized by "adaptations, interpretations, and excerpts across literature and arts". In *The Book of Ram*, Pattanaik presents the story as a collection of ideas rather than a linear narrative. The text draws from various sources, including classical Sanskrit texts, regional retellings, and oral traditions. This layered approach creates a dialogic structure in which different interpretations coexist and interact. Such intertextuality challenges the reader to engage critically with the narrative, recognizing that meaning is not fixed but constructed through the interplay of multiple voices. The epic becomes a site of negotiation, where cultural values and ethical principles are continuously reinterpreted.

Intertextuality forms the structural and philosophical core of Pattanaik's retellings. Rather than presenting the Ramayana as a singular, authoritative narrative, Devdutt Pattanaik explicitly acknowledges the multiplicity of Ramayana traditions across regions and time periods. In *The*

*Book of Ram*, he frames the epic not as a fixed story but as a collection of ideas that evolve through retelling. This aligns with Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality, which posits that every text is shaped by its relationship with other texts (Kristeva 66).

Pattanaik emphasizes that the Ramayana has been narrated in multiple ways depending on cultural contexts, thereby reinforcing the idea that no single version holds absolute authority (Pattanaik, *The Book of Ram* 12). This perspective resonates with A. K. Ramanujan's assertion that there are "many Ramayanas," each reflecting distinct socio-cultural values (Ramanujan 46).

By incorporating these diverse narrative strands, Pattanaik constructs a dialogic framework in which texts interact with one another. This intertextual layering transforms the epic into a dynamic discourse rather than a static tradition.

## **2. Rewriting Sita: Feminist Intertextuality**

One of the most significant aspects of Pattanaik's intertextual approach is his reimagining of Sita. In *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, the narrative centers on Sita's perspective, thereby shifting the focus from Rama to a traditionally marginalized voice. Scholarly studies highlight that Pattanaik's retelling "foregrounds Sita as an autonomous subject" and challenges patriarchal interpretations of the epic. By presenting Sita as a thinker, decision-maker, and moral agent, Pattanaik engages with feminist discourse while drawing upon existing variations of the Ramayana that emphasize her strength and agency. This intertextual strategy not only reinterprets the character but also critiques the socio-cultural frameworks that have shaped her representation. Sita becomes a site of resistance against patriarchal narratives, embodying a more nuanced understanding of femininity and power.

In *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, Pattanaik foregrounds Sita's voice, thereby challenging patriarchal interpretations of the epic. Unlike traditional narratives that depict Sita as passive and submissive, this retelling presents her as a reflective and morally autonomous figure.

Pattanaik reinterprets Sita's experiences—such as exile and trial by fire—not as mere acts of suffering but as moments of agency and ethical choice (Pattanaik, *Sita* 85). This aligns with feminist readings that seek to recover marginalized voices within canonical texts. As Sodha argues, Pattanaik's Sita "emerges as a subject who negotiates power rather than merely submits to it" (Sodha 4).

This recharacterization is inherently intertextual, as it draws upon alternative Ramayana traditions where Sita is portrayed as strong and independent. Scholars such as Nabaneeta Dev Sen have highlighted the presence of such variations in women's retellings of the Ramayana (Dev Sen 12).

Thus, Pattanaik's portrayal of Sita not only reinterprets the character but also engages with a broader network of feminist discourses, demonstrating how intertextuality can serve as a tool for ideological critique.

### **3. Hanuman as Symbol: Devotion and Interpretation**

In *My Hanuman Chalisa*, Pattanaik adopts a symbolic and interpretive approach to the figure of Hanuman. Rather than presenting a straightforward narrative, the text explores the philosophical and cultural meanings embedded in the Hanuman Chalisa. Hanuman is depicted as a symbol of devotion, strength, and selflessness, but these qualities are interpreted through multiple lenses. Pattanaik draws connections between mythological symbolism and contemporary life, demonstrating how ancient narratives continue to inform modern values. This approach reflects the broader function of mythology as a system of meaning-making. As scholars note, mythological stories “convey essential values and guide individuals toward understanding life and culture”. Through intertextual references, Pattanaik situates Hanuman within a network of symbolic meanings that transcend the boundaries of the original text.

In *My Hanuman Chalisa*, Pattanaik shifts from narrative retelling to symbolic interpretation. Hanuman is not merely a mythological character but a representation of devotion, discipline, and self-realization. Pattanaik decodes the verses of the Hanuman Chalisa by connecting them to broader philosophical and cultural meanings, thereby situating the text within a network of interpretations (Pattanaik, *My Hanuman Chalisa* 23). This approach reflects intertextuality at a conceptual level, where meanings are derived from the interaction between texts, symbols, and cultural contexts.

As Rani and Kansal observe, Pattanaik's works “transform mythological symbols into tools for contemporary understanding” (Rani and Kansal 7). Hanuman's character, therefore, becomes a site of multiple interpretations, reflecting the plurality inherent in mythological traditions.

This interpretive multiplicity underscores the idea that mythology is not static but continuously redefined through cultural engagement

### **4. Narrative Techniques and Structural Intertextuality**

Pattanaik's use of narrative techniques further enhances the intertextual nature of his work. His texts often employ non-linear structures, illustrations, and commentary, creating a multi-layered reading experience. Research on Ramayana retellings indicates that such techniques, including flashbacks and thematic segmentation, contribute to the reinterpretation of the epic in contemporary contexts. Pattanaik's blending of storytelling and analysis allows readers to navigate between narrative and interpretation, reinforcing the interconnectedness of texts. This structural intertextuality reflects the postmodern emphasis on fragmentation and plurality. The narrative is not presented as a cohesive whole but as a mosaic of perspectives, inviting readers to construct their own understanding.

Pattanaik's narrative techniques further reinforce intertextuality. His use of illustrations, segmented storytelling, and explanatory commentary creates a layered reading experience that combines narrative and analysis.

In *The Book of Ram*, for example, the inclusion of visual elements alongside textual explanations encourages readers to engage with the story from multiple perspectives (Pattanaik 30). This technique mirrors the structure of traditional oral storytelling, where narratives are accompanied by interpretation and discussion.

Scholars note that such techniques contribute to the reinterpretation of mythological narratives by allowing readers to navigate between different layers of meaning (Kumar and Srinivas 112). The result is a text that is both informative and interpretive, blurring the boundaries between storytelling and critical analysis.

This structural intertextuality aligns with postmodern literary practices, which emphasize fragmentation, multiplicity, and reader participation.

### **5. Myth, Modernity, and Cultural Dialogue**

Pattanaik's intertextual approach also facilitates a dialogue between myth and modernity. His retellings address contemporary issues such as gender, identity, and ethics, demonstrating the continued relevance of mythological narratives. Scholars argue that Pattanaik's work "reimagines myth for contemporary readers" by integrating traditional themes with modern concerns. This synthesis allows the Ramayana to function as a living tradition, capable of adapting to changing cultural contexts. Through intertextuality, Pattanaik bridges the gap between past and present, creating a narrative space where ancient and modern perspectives coexist.

Pattanaik's intertextual approach facilitates a dialogue between ancient myth and modern society. By addressing contemporary issues such as gender roles, identity, and ethics, his retellings demonstrate the continued relevance of the Ramayana.

In *Sita*, for instance, themes of autonomy and resilience resonate with modern feminist discourse, while *The Book of Ram* explores questions of duty and leadership in a contemporary context (Pattanaik, *Sita* 102; *The Book of Ram* 55).

As Ranjan and Singh argue, Pattanaik's work "bridges the gap between tradition and modernity by reinterpreting mythological narratives in light of present-day concerns" (Ranjan and Singh 3). This synthesis highlights the adaptability of myth as a cultural framework.

Through intertextuality, Pattanaik creates a space where past and present intersect, enabling readers to reinterpret traditional values in contemporary contexts.

## 6. Plurality and the Democratization of Myth

Perhaps the most significant implication of Pattanaik's intertextuality is the democratization of myth. By acknowledging multiple versions of the Ramayana, his work challenges hierarchical notions of textual authority. This pluralistic approach aligns with the idea that mythology is not owned by a single tradition but belongs to a collective cultural imagination. Pattanaik's narratives encourage readers to engage with the epic as participants rather than passive recipients. Such democratization reflects broader cultural shifts toward inclusivity and diversity, emphasizing the importance of multiple voices in shaping collective narratives.

A defining feature of Pattanaik's work is its emphasis on plurality. By acknowledging multiple versions of the Ramayana, he challenges hierarchical notions of textual authority and promotes a more inclusive understanding of myth.

In *The Book of Ram*, Pattanaik explicitly states that the Ramayana is not a single story but a collection of narratives shaped by cultural and historical contexts (Pattanaik 14). This perspective aligns with Ramanujan's argument that the Ramayana tradition is characterized by diversity rather than uniformity (Ramanujan 48).

This pluralistic approach democratizes mythology, allowing diverse voices to coexist within the narrative. It encourages readers to engage with the text critically, recognizing that meaning is not imposed but constructed through interpretation.

Such democratization reflects broader cultural shifts toward inclusivity and diversity, reinforcing the relevance of intertextuality in contemporary literary discourse.

## CONCLUSION

Devdutt Pattanaik's Ramayana narratives exemplify the transformative potential of intertextuality in contemporary literature. By integrating multiple traditions, reinterpreting characters, and engaging with modern discourses, his works redefine the boundaries of mythological storytelling. Through *The Book of Ram*, *Sita*, and *My Hanuman Chalisa*, Pattanaik constructs a pluralistic narrative framework that challenges the notion of a singular, authoritative Ramayana. Instead, the epic emerges as a dynamic and evolving tradition shaped by diverse voices and perspectives. Ultimately, Pattanaik's intertextual approach underscores the enduring relevance of mythology in modern society. By embracing plurality and encouraging critical engagement, his work invites readers to reconsider the meanings of tradition, identity, and storytelling in a rapidly changing world.

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