



Women of Essence: Feminist Rewriting of the Ramayana in Amish Tripathi's Ram Chandra Series

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Abstract

Contemporary Indian English fiction has increasingly revisited mythological narratives to interrogate entrenched patriarchal structures and gendered moral frameworks. Among recent mythological retellings, Amish Tripathi's Ram Chandra Series offers a significant feminist reinterpretation of the Ramayana by foregrounding female agency, leadership and ethical autonomy. This paper examines how Tripathi reconstructs women characters particularly Sita, Sunaina, Kaikeyi, Samichi and other female figures as central agents of political, military and moral action rather than passive symbols of virtue or sacrifice. Drawing upon feminist literary theory, myth criticism and Ramayana scholarship, the study argues that the Ram Chandra Series challenges traditional patriarchal representations embedded in classical retellings. By redefining gendered dharma, redistributing moral authority and presenting women as ethical decision-makers, Tripathi transforms myth into a space of feminist ethical inquiry. The paper concludes that the Ram Chandra Series contributes meaningfully to feminist mythological fiction in Indian English literature by reimagining epic womanhood in ways that resonate with contemporary gender discourse.

Keywords: Feminism, Ramayana, Myth Rewriting, Women's Agency, Amish Tripathi, Indian English Literature

1. Introduction

Mythological narratives have historically functioned as powerful cultural instruments through which societies articulate ethical values, social norms and gender roles. In the Indian context, epics such as the Ramayana occupy a central position in shaping collective moral consciousness and cultural identity. These narratives have traditionally been invested with sacred authority, rendering their ethical frameworks and character portrayals normative and resistant to critique (Eliade, 1963). However, embedded within these revered narratives are deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that regulate women's roles, agency and moral worth? In classical retellings of the Ramayana, women are frequently positioned within narrowly defined moral paradigms that privilege obedience, chastity, sacrifice and relational duty. Female characters such as Sita, Kaikeyi and Mandodari are often interpreted symbolically rather than as autonomous ethical subjects. Sita is idealized as the embodiment of endurance and purity, while Kaikeyi is vilified as the disruptive woman whose ambition destabilizes social and cosmic order (Bose, 2004; Sutherland, 1989). Such representations reflect what



Simone de Beauvoir identifies as the historical construction of woman as the “Other,” whose identity is defined in relation to male authority rather than independent subjectivity (de Beauvoir, 2011).

Feminist literary criticism has long challenged the ideological foundations of such portrayals. Critics argue that mythic narratives do not merely reflect social realities but actively participate in the naturalization of gender hierarchies by sanctifying patriarchal norms through divine sanction (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Showalter, 1977). When myths are treated as immutable sacred truths, gender inequality becomes embedded within cultural memory and moral instruction. Consequently, feminist engagement with myth is not an act of rejection but one of critical reinterpretation and ethical recovery.

In recent decades, Indian English literature has emerged as a significant site for feminist myth rewriting. Contemporary writers increasingly revisit epic narratives to interrogate inherited gender norms and to articulate alternative representations of womanhood that resonate with modern ethical and social values (Mukherjee, 2000). Feminist retellings seek to restore psychological depth, moral agency and political significance to women characters who were previously marginalized or demonized. This literary movement reflects a broader cultural shift toward questioning patriarchal authority and reclaiming women’s voices within traditional narratives.

Amish Tripathi’s Ram Chandra Series occupies a distinctive position within this trend of feminist reinterpretation. While remaining firmly rooted in the Ramayana tradition, the series departs from classical portrayals by reconstructing women as central agents of political power, military strategy and ethical decision-making. Characters such as Sita, Sunaina, Kaikeyi and Samichi are not confined to symbolic or supportive roles but actively shape the moral and political trajectory of the narrative. Through these portrayals, Tripathi challenges the patriarchal logic that traditionally governs epic storytelling. Unlike earlier retellings that either idealize female suffering or demonize female ambition, the Ram Chandra Series offers a more nuanced feminist reconfiguration. Women are presented as leaders, warriors, strategists and moral thinkers whose authority derives from competence, responsibility and ethical reasoning rather than relational status. This redistribution of moral authority disrupts gendered hierarchies embedded in classical interpretations of dharma, which often assign women restrictive moral duties while granting men ethical autonomy (Sharma, 2000).

Importantly, Tripathi’s feminist rewriting does not abandon the cultural and ethical seriousness of the epic. Instead, it reinterprets myth through the lens of ethical modernity, aligning epic values with contemporary concerns such as gender equality, leadership accountability and moral agency. By situating women at the center of ethical deliberation, the series transforms myth into a space of gender-inclusive moral discourse rather than patriarchal validation.

This paper examines how the Ram Chandra Series functions as a feminist rewriting of the Ramayana by foregrounding women as ethical, political and strategic agents. It argues that Tripathi’s reinterpretation does not merely revise female characterization but restructures the ethical foundations of epic narrative through gender-inclusive moral agency. Through close textual analysis and engagement with feminist literary theory, myth criticism and Ramayana scholarship, the study demonstrates how modern mythological fiction can serve as a powerful medium for feminist discourse in contemporary Indian English literature.



2. Feminist Literary Theory and Myth

Feminist literary theory provides a critical framework for examining how narratives construct, sustain and legitimize gendered power relations. Simone de Beauvoir's foundational argument that woman is historically defined as the "Other" reveals how cultural narratives marginalize female subjectivity and normalize male authority (de Beauvoir, 2011). In mythological traditions, this marginalization is often sanctified through sacred discourse, rendering gender hierarchy natural and unquestionable.

Elaine Showalter's concept of gynocriticism emphasizes the necessity of analyzing literature from women-centered perspectives rather than patriarchal norms (Showalter, 1977). This approach is particularly relevant to epic narratives, where women are frequently idealized as symbols of virtue or demonized as sources of chaos. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) further argue that canonical texts confine women within restrictive symbolic roles that limit their narrative agency and ethical autonomy.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity challenges essentialist notions of femininity by arguing that gender is constructed through repeated social and cultural acts (Butler, 1990). Applied to myth, this framework exposes how epic narratives repeatedly perform gender norms that reinforce obedience, sacrifice and passivity as feminine virtues. Feminist rewriting seeks to disrupt these performances by reimagining women as active agents rather than static ideals. Myth criticism complements feminist theory by revealing how myths operate as ideological systems. Roland Barthes (1972) conceptualizes myth as a mode of discourse that transforms historically contingent values into naturalized truths. In the context of the Ramayana, patriarchal gender roles are presented as divinely ordained rather than socially constructed. Feminist critics argue that challenging such myths is essential for dismantling the ideological foundations of gender inequality.

Within this theoretical intersection, feminist rewriting of myth emerges as an act of ethical and narrative resistance. By revisiting sacred narratives through feminist perspectives, contemporary writers transform myth into a dynamic site of critique and renewal. Amish Tripathi's Ram Chandra Series participates in this tradition by interrogating patriarchal assumptions embedded in epic discourse and reconstructing women as ethical, political and intellectual agents.

3. Feminist Rewriting of the Ramayana

The Ramayana has always existed as a plural narrative tradition rather than a singular authoritative text. Richman's formulation of "many Ramayanas" highlights the epic's adaptability across regions, languages and historical contexts (Richman, 1991). This multiplicity creates interpretive space for revision and reinterpretation, allowing each retelling to reflect contemporary ethical and ideological concerns.

Despite this plurality, dominant classical retellings largely reinforce patriarchal values. Women are assessed primarily through relational roles as wives, mothers, or temptresses and their moral worth is often measured by obedience and endurance (Bose, 2004). Sita's suffering is idealized as virtue; while Kaikeyi's political ambition is demonized, reflecting deep-seated anxieties about female agency (Sutherland, 1989).



Modern feminist retellings challenge these conventions by restoring psychological depth and ethical autonomy to female characters. Writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Anand Neelakantan have reimagined epic narratives to foreground marginalized perspectives and interrogate moral absolutism. However, many such retellings focus on narrative inversion rather than structural ethical transformation.

Tripathi's Ram Chandra Series differs in that it integrates feminist concerns into the moral architecture of the narrative itself. Female agency is not an exception but a structural principle. Women participate actively in governance, warfare and ethical deliberation, challenging the patriarchal logic of epic tradition while retaining cultural continuity.

4. Sita: Warrior, Leader and Philosopher

Sita represents the most significant feminist reconstruction in the Ram Chandra Series. In *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, Tripathi radically departs from traditional portrayals by presenting Sita as a trained warrior, strategist and ethical thinker (Tripathi, 2017). Her strength is intellectual, moral and martial, challenging the reduction of femininity to endurance and sacrifice.

Unlike classical depictions that emphasize Sita's suffering and obedience, Tripathi foregrounds her autonomy and leadership. Sita participates actively in political decision-making and military strategy, asserting authority through competence rather than relational status. Her ethical reasoning is grounded in rational judgment and compassion, aligning her leadership with modern feminist ethics.

Sita's reinterpretation also challenges gendered dharma. Rather than accepting duty as a fixed gendered role, she interprets dharma as contextual ethical responsibility. This feminist redefinition resists patriarchal moral frameworks that confine women to passive virtue and affirms women as independent moral agents (Butler, 1990; Dhand, 2002).

Through Sita, Tripathi reconstructs epic womanhood as a site of ethical authority rather than moral suffering, marking a decisive feminist intervention in mythological fiction.

5. Sunaina and Female Political Authority

Queen Sunaina of Mithila represents one of the most compelling feminist reconstructions in Amish Tripathi's Ram Chandra Series. Unlike traditional epic queens who are largely confined to maternal or supportive roles, Sunaina is portrayed as a politically astute, intellectually formidable and ethically grounded ruler. Her characterization challenges the patriarchal assumption that political authority and statecraft are inherently masculine domains.

In classical epic narratives, queens often exercise influence indirectly, operating through emotional persuasion or maternal intervention. Sunaina, however, functions as a co-ruler whose authority is institutional and explicit. She participates actively in governance, foreign policy and administrative decision-making, demonstrating a command over political strategy and ethical judgment (Tripathi, 2017). Her leadership is not symbolic but operational, positioning her as a legitimate political subject rather than an adjunct to male power.

Sunaina's political authority also embodies feminist ethics of responsibility and care. Her decisions reflect an acute awareness of social consequences, economic stability and collective welfare. This approach resonates with feminist critiques of power that emphasize relational ethics over authoritarian command (hooks, 2000). Sunaina governs not through domination but



through deliberation, dialogue and ethical foresight, offering an alternative model of leadership grounded in inclusivity and moral responsibility.

Importantly, Tripathi does not masculinize Sunaina to legitimize her authority. Her political competence coexists with emotional intelligence and maternal concern, thereby rejecting binary oppositions between femininity and leadership. By presenting Sunaina as both nurturing and authoritative, the Ram Chandra Series destabilizes gender stereotypes that associate women's power with excess or instability.

Through Sunaina, Tripathi reimagines epic queenship as a space of feminist political agency. Her portrayal affirms that women's leadership is not an aberration within mythic tradition but a suppressed possibility that contemporary retellings can ethically recover.

6. Kaikeyi: Re-evaluating the Villain Narrative

Kaikeyi remains one of the most contested female figures in the Ramayana tradition. Classical retellings frequently depict her as the archetypal villain whose ambition and emotional volatility precipitate exile, suffering and cosmic disruption. Feminist critics have long argued that this vilification reflects patriarchal anxiety surrounding female power rather than objective moral evaluation (Sutherland, 1989).

Tripathi's Ram Chandra Series undertakes a significant feminist intervention by re-evaluating Kaikeyi beyond the simplistic binary of virtue and vice. In *Scion of Ikshvaku*, Kaikeyi's actions are contextualized within political instability, maternal concern and ethical conflict rather than portrayed as the result of manipulative desire (Tripathi, 2015). This narrative reframing restores psychological depth and moral complexity to her character.

Rather than demonizing Kaikeyi for political ambition, Tripathi exposes the gender bias underlying her traditional condemnation. Male characters who pursue power are often celebrated as strategic or visionary, while Kaikeyi's political agency is framed as transgressive. By interrogating this double standard, the series aligns with feminist critiques that highlight how women's ambition is frequently pathologized within patriarchal narratives (de Beauvoir, 2011).

Kaikeyi's re-evaluation also complicates moral absolutism. Her decisions emerge from competing ethical imperatives maternal responsibility, political loyalty and fear of marginalization. Tripathi's portrayal does not seek to absolve her uncritically but invites ethical empathy rather than moral condemnation. This shift transforms Kaikeyi from a cautionary figure into a tragic political actor shaped by structural constraints.

Through this feminist reinterpretation, the Ram Chandra Series challenges the moral economy of epic storytelling, demonstrating how patriarchal myth transforms politically assertive women into villains. Kaikeyi's rehabilitation thus becomes a powerful critique of gendered moral judgment within mythic tradition.

7. Samichi and Other Women: Expanding the Feminist Spectrum

Beyond principal female figures, the Ram Chandra Series constructs a broad feminist spectrum through secondary women characters such as Samichi and others who participate in warfare, strategy and ethical decision-making. Their presence is significant because it resists the tokenization of feminist agency and instead normalizes women's participation across multiple



spheres of action.

Samichi exemplifies this expanded feminist landscape. She is portrayed as courageous, strategically capable and ethically committed, challenging the marginalization of women in martial and political contexts. Unlike classical epics where female participation in warfare is exceptional or symbolic, Tripathi integrates women organically into military and administrative structures, suggesting that female agency is systemic rather than extraordinary. This narrative strategy aligns with feminist theories that emphasize collective agency over singular heroic representation (Mohanty, 2003). By distributing power across multiple women, the series resists the creation of a lone “exceptional woman” who succeeds by conforming to masculine norms. Instead, women’s competence is depicted as diverse, relational and embedded within social institutions.

Furthermore, the inclusion of multiple women in positions of authority disrupts the patriarchal logic that confines women to domestic or emotional domains. Their participation in decision-making processes affirms that ethical judgment and strategic thinking are not gendered capacities. This collective feminist presence transforms the epic world into a more inclusive moral universe.

Through Samichi and other women, the Ram Chandra Series expands the feminist scope of mythological fiction, demonstrating that gender equality in narrative representation requires systemic rather than symbolic change.

8. Challenging Patriarchy and Gendered Dharma

One of the most significant feminist contributions of the Ram Chandra Series lies in its challenge to gendered interpretations of dharma. In classical Indian thought, dharma often functions as a gender-specific moral code that assigns restrictive duties to women while granting men ethical autonomy and public authority (Sharma, 2000). Women’s dharma is frequently defined in terms of obedience, sacrifice and relational loyalty.

Tripathi disrupts this patriarchal moral framework by reinterpreting dharma as contextual ethical responsibility rather than fixed gendered duty. Women characters in the series do not accept dharma as an inherited role but actively interpret it through ethical reasoning, justice and consequence (Dhand, 2002). This reinterpretation aligns with feminist critiques that challenge moral systems which naturalize inequality under the guise of tradition.

By allowing women to engage with dharma as ethical agents rather than moral subjects, the Ram Chandra Series redistributes moral authority. Ethical judgment becomes a shared human capacity rather than a male privilege. This shift destabilizes patriarchal hierarchies embedded within epic tradition and affirms women’s right to moral autonomy.

Importantly, this feminist redefinition of dharma does not reject tradition outright. Instead, it subjects tradition to ethical scrutiny, retaining its moral seriousness while discarding its gendered rigidity. Myth thus becomes a site of ethical negotiation rather than patriarchal enforcement.

Through its challenge to gendered dharma, the Ram Chandra Series demonstrates how feminist rewriting can ethically renew myth, transforming sacred narratives into inclusive moral discourses compatible with contemporary gender consciousness.



9. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Amish Tripathi's Ram Chandra Series constitutes a substantial feminist rewriting of the Ramayana. By reconstructing women as ethical, political and strategic agents, Tripathi challenges patriarchal mythic structures and redefines epic womanhood.

Through characters such as Sita, Sunaina, Kaikeyi and Samichi, the series redistributes moral authority and reframes dharma as a gender-inclusive ethical principle grounded in responsibility rather than obedience. Myth thus becomes a site of feminist ethical inquiry rather than patriarchal validation.

The Ram Chandra Series contributes meaningfully to feminist mythological fiction in Indian English literature by demonstrating how ancient epics can be reimagined to address contemporary gender concerns while retaining cultural depth. The study affirms that feminist rewriting of myth is not an act of rejection but of ethical renewal. Future research may explore comparative feminist retellings or reader reception of modern mythological narratives.

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