



Reclaiming the Feminine Voice in Mythological Retellings: A Comparative Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Madeline Miller

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Abstract

This paper examines the feminist reimagination of mythology in contemporary fiction through a comparative analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* and Madeline Miller's *Circe* and *The Song of Achilles*. Both authors recover marginalised female figures from canonical epic traditions and grant them narrative authority, yet their cultural positions and strategies differ in instructive ways. Divakaruni writes from within a living Hindu epic tradition, retelling the Mahabharata and the Ramayana through the voices of Draupadi and Sita while negotiating religious sensibility and diaspora identity. Miller approaches the Greek tradition as secularised classical heritage, free to subject its gods and heroes to psychological and feminist revision. Drawing on feminist revisionist mythmaking, narrative theory, postcolonial feminism, and adaptation studies, and through close reading of the principal texts, this study argues that both writers practise what Adrienne Rich called re-vision, the act of looking back at old texts with new eyes, but that the stakes and strategies of that act differ profoundly when the source is sacred scripture rather than secular myth.

Keywords: - Feminist Revisionist Mythology, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Madeline Miller, Narrative Voice, Draupadi, Circe, Postcolonial Feminism, Re-vision.

1. Introduction

The early twenty first century has seen a remarkable flowering of mythological retellings that place women at the centre of stories from which they were once excluded or in which they appeared only as instruments of male destiny. This movement is not new in impulse, since feminist writers have long sought to recover silenced voices, but its scale and commercial reach are unprecedented. Bookshops now carry shelves of novels that hand the microphone to the women of ancient epic, and these books command large international readerships.⁵

Two authors illustrate the range of this enterprise with particular clarity. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian American writer, retells the great Sanskrit epics through the eyes of their central women, giving Draupadi and Sita the first person authority they were denied in the canonical versions.^{1,2} Madeline Miller, an American classicist, reanimates Greek myth by granting interior life to figures such as Circe and Patroclus, transforming marginal characters into protagonists of sustained psychological narrative.^{3,4}

This paper argues that Divakaruni and Miller represent two paradigms of feminist mythological retelling that are shaped less by gender alone than by the cultural status of the source material. Where Divakaruni works within a tradition that remains sacred and living for millions of readers, Miller works with a tradition that the modern West treats as cultural heritage rather than religious practice. This difference conditions how far each author can go in revising, criticising, or humanising the inherited story, and it shapes the very form their feminism takes.¹⁰

2. Theoretical Framework

The central theoretical reference for this study is Adrienne Rich's concept of re-vision, defined as the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction. For Rich, this act is not merely literary but a matter of survival, a way for women to refuse the self images handed down by a male tradition. Both Divakaruni and Miller perform this re-vision, returning to canonical narratives and asking what they would sound like if told by the women within them.⁵

Alicia Ostriker's account of revisionist mythmaking extends Rich's insight, describing how women poets and novelists seize mythic figures and make them vehicles for new meanings, hijacking the authority of the old story for new ends. Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism provides a complementary frame, directing attention to women as producers of textual meaning rather than as objects of representation, and inviting us to read these novels as part of a distinct female literary tradition.^{6,7}

Postcolonial feminist theory, particularly Gayatri Spivak's question of whether the subaltern can speak, sharpens the analysis of Divakaruni, whose project of giving voice to Draupadi and Sita must contend with the double marginalisation of gender and colonial history. Finally, Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation reminds us that every retelling is also an interpretation, a creative act that carries the values of its own moment back into the ancient narrative. Together these frameworks allow us to read the two authors as engaged in a common project pursued under very different conditions.^{8,9}

3. The Epic Sources: Sacred and Secular

The difference between the two authors begins with the nature of their sources. Divakaruni draws on the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, texts classified in Indian tradition as itihasa and revered as scripture as much as literature. These narratives are recited in temples and homes, enacted in festivals, and woven into the moral imagination of millions. Their characters are objects of devotion, and any retelling enters a field charged with religious feeling.¹⁰

Miller draws on Homer and Ovid, texts that occupy the centre of the Western literary canon but no longer command religious belief. The Greek gods are studied in classrooms, not worshipped in temples. This secularisation, the product of two millennia of cultural change,

leaves the modern author free to treat the Olympians as material for unrestricted reinterpretation.^{3,4}

This contrast is not absolute, since the Sanskrit epics have their own long history of retelling and regional variation, and devotion does not preclude creativity. But the difference in the living religious charge of the two traditions sets the basic terms within which each author works, determining what counts as reverence and what as transgression.¹⁰

4. Cultural Positioning and the Sacred

Divakaruni retells stories that function simultaneously as literature and as scripture. This imposes a delicate constraint. She must humanise her heroines, give them desire, anger, and doubt, without appearing to profane them. Her Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* is proud, witty, ambitious, and politically astute, yet the novel never mocks the epic framework that contains her. Reverence and revision are held in careful balance.¹

Miller faces no comparable constraint. Greek religion is no longer practised as a living faith, and so the Olympian gods are available for unrestricted reinterpretation. Miller's gods can be petty, cruel, vain, or absurd without risking the offence that would attend a similar treatment of living deities. The freedom Miller enjoys is precisely the freedom that Divakaruni must handle with care, and this asymmetry runs through every aspect of their work.⁴

Divakaruni's position as a diaspora writer adds a further dimension. Writing in English for a global readership, she performs a double act of translation, carrying Hindu epic into a Western literary marketplace while reclaiming it for women. Her reverence is therefore strategic as well as sincere, a means of asserting the dignity of a tradition often exoticised by outside observers.⁸

5. Narrative Voice and Focalization

Both authors rely on first person narration to achieve their central effect, which is the transfer of authority from the epic narrator to the female character. The technique is deceptively simple but profoundly consequential, since it determines whose consciousness organises the story and whose suffering the reader is asked to inhabit.

The Palace of Illusions is narrated by Draupadi herself, who recounts the events of the Mahabharata as her own lived experience rather than as the deeds of the Pandava brothers. The great war becomes, in her telling, a tragedy she both shapes and suffers. *The Forest of Enchantments* performs the same operation for Sita, allowing her to speak the grief and dignity that the Valmiki Ramayana renders largely from the outside.^{1,2}

Miller likewise uses first person voice. Circe narrates her own centuries of exile, transforming a minor sorceress of the *Odyssey* into the protagonist of a sustained meditation on power, mortality, and self determination. *The Song of Achilles* is narrated not by Achilles but by Patroclus, a choice that re-centres the epic on love and loss rather than martial glory. In both writers the formal device is the same, but Divakaruni's narration carries the additional weight of speaking back to a tradition her readers may hold sacred.^{3,4}

6. The Palace of Illusions and The Forest of Enchantments

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni reconstructs the Mahabharata around the inner life of Draupadi, here called Panchaali. The novel follows her from a mysterious birth from fire, through her marriage to five husbands, to the catastrophic war that her humiliation helps

precipitate. Throughout, Draupadi is presented as an intelligent and desiring subject whose choices matter, not as a passive prize won and lost by men.¹

The famous scene of her disrobing in the assembly hall becomes, in Divakaruni's hands, the moral centre of the book. Draupadi's question to the silent elders who permit her humiliation indicts an entire social order that subordinates women. Yet the novel also explores her flaws, her pride, her partiality, and her unspoken attachment to Karna, refusing to replace one flat portrait with another.¹

The Forest of Enchantments turns to Sita, the heroine of the Ramayana, and gives her a voice of quiet strength. Divakaruni reframes Sita's trials, her abduction, her ordeal by fire, and her final return to the earth, not as passive suffering but as a series of chosen acts of integrity. The novel honours the devotional image of Sita while insisting on her interiority and her right to judge the world that judges her.²

7. Circe and The Song of Achilles

Miller's Circe takes a figure who appears only briefly in the Odyssey, the witch who turns men into pigs, and gives her an entire life. Born a lesser divinity, scorned by her family, exiled to a solitary island, Circe discovers in her exile the power of witchcraft and, more importantly, the possibility of choosing her own existence. Her arc moves steadily away from the cruelty of the gods toward a hard won mortal humanity.⁴

The novel is unmistakably feminist in its concerns. Circe endures the contempt and violence of powerful males, divine and human alike, and slowly transforms her isolation into self possession. Her final choice, to renounce immortality in favour of a mortal life she has chosen, reads as a parable of female self determination achieved against a hostile order.⁴

The Song of Achilles retells the Iliad through the love between Achilles and Patroclus. Though its central figures are male, the novel shares the revisionist impulse, displacing martial glory with intimacy and grief and questioning the heroic code that the original celebrates. Together the two novels show Miller exercising a freedom of reinterpretation that the secular status of Greek myth makes possible.³

8. Reconfiguring the Mythic Heroine

A revealing contrast emerges in how each author resolves her heroine's story. Divakaruni's women find meaning by transforming their relationship to community and duty. They remain bound to the structures of family, dynasty, and dharma, but they reinterpret those structures from within, asserting dignity and judgement without abandoning the world that shaped them.^{1,2}

Miller's heroine moves instead toward individual liberation. Circe achieves selfhood by withdrawing from a corrupt divine order and choosing a separate, mortal life. The difference reflects, in part, the distinct cultural philosophies that inform each tradition, the Indian emphasis on the self realised within relationship and the Western emphasis on the autonomous individual.⁴

Neither resolution is presented as superior. Each answers to the values of its tradition and the needs of its readers. But the contrast shows that feminist retelling is not a single template applied uniformly; it takes the shape of the cultural soil in which it grows.

9. Comparative Framework

The following table summarises the principal points of comparison between the two authors.

Table 1: Comparative Framework

Dimension	Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni	Madeline Miller
Source tradition	Hindu epic, living scripture	Greek myth, secular heritage
Cultural position	Insider, diaspora perspective	Outsider, classicist perspective
Central figures	Draupadi, Sita	Circe, Patroclus
Constraint	Religious sensibility	Creative freedom
Narrative voice	First person heroine	First person heroine and lover
Heroine's arc	Agency within community	Liberation through withdrawal
Underlying ethic	Duty reinterpreted	Individual self determination

10. Reception, Reverence, and Controversy

The reception of the two bodies of work reflects the difference in their cultural stakes. Divakaruni's novels have been widely embraced but have also drawn debate about interpretive legitimacy, since any reworking of revered figures invites scrutiny from readers who hold them sacred. Her careful balance of reverence and revision is itself a response to this charged field of reception.^{1,2}

Miller's novels, by contrast, have been received largely as literary and commercial successes, free of religious controversy. The questions raised about her work concern craft and interpretation rather than profanation. This difference confirms the central argument of this study, that the meaning of feminist retelling depends heavily on whether the source remains an object of living faith.^{3,4}

11. Conclusion

This comparison shows that feminist mythological retelling is not a single practice but a family of practices conditioned by the cultural standing of the source. Divakaruni and Miller both enact Adrienne Rich's re-vision, returning to canonical stories to recover the women within them, yet the meaning of that return differs sharply. For Divakaruni, re-vision is an act of reverent reclamation, balancing innovation against the sacred and against the pressures of diaspora representation. For Miller, it is an act of secular liberation, free to dismantle a divine order that no longer commands belief.

Neither approach is superior. Each answers to the needs of its tradition and its readers, and each enlarges the possibilities of the form. Together they demonstrate the enduring capacity of myth to absorb new questions, and they confirm that the work of giving voice to the silenced is never finished but is taken up anew in every generation and in every cultural setting. As long as old stories continue to shape how societies imagine women, the work of re-vision will remain both necessary and unfinished.

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