

RECASTING MYTH, REWRITING IDENTITY: INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE AND PURANIC ITIHAS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dynamic interplay between Global South literatures and Indian mythology, focusing on how Indian English writers reinterpret Puranic Itihas (epics and puranas) to articulate postcolonial identity, cultural memory, and global belonging. By situating Indian English literature within the broader discourse of the Global South, the study highlights myth as both heritage and a living narrative. Through comparative analysis of Indian retellings and parallel traditions in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia, the paper argues that myth functions as a counter narrative to Eurocentric literary canons, enabling Global South writers to reclaim indigenous epistemologies while engaging global readerships.

KEYWORDS: *Global South, Indian English Literature, Puranic Itihas, Postcolonial Studies, Myth Criticism, Cultural Memory, Comparative Literature*

INTRODUCTION

The Global South has emerged as a critical category in literary studies, foregrounding voices marginalized by colonial histories and Eurocentric canons. Indian English Literature, positioned at the crossroads of indigenous tradition and global readership, exemplifies this hybridity. Central to its narrative strategies is the mobilization of *Puranic Itihas*, the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Puranas, as reservoirs of myth, ethics, and cultural identity. This paper investigates how Indian English writers reinterpret these mythic texts to negotiate identity, resist colonial epistemologies, and situate India within the larger Global South discourse.

Research Question: *How do Indian English writers mobilize Puranic myth to articulate Global South identities and counter Eurocentric literary paradigms?*

R.K. NARAYAN: SIMPLIFIED RETELLINGS OF EPICS FOR GLOBAL AUDIENCES

R.K. Narayan's prose versions of *The Ramayana* (1977) and *The Mahabharata* (1978) are widely acknowledged as landmark contributions to Indian English literature because they brought India's mythic heritage into the orbit of global readership. Unlike traditional Sanskrit commentaries or regional vernacular retellings, Narayan deliberately adopted a style of simplicity and clarity. His language avoids the ornate density of Sanskrit poetics and theological elaboration, yet it retains the narrative fidelity and moral essence of the originals. This stylistic choice was not accidental; Narayan's broader literary ethos was always to portray ordinary lives caught in extraordinary circumstances, and in these retellings he applied the same principle to epic heroes and heroines.

Narayan's versions emphasize ethical dilemmas and human choices rather than metaphysical speculation. For instance, Rama's exile is presented less as a cosmic drama and more as a human test of endurance, loyalty, and moral steadfastness. Similarly, the Mahabharata's sprawling complexity is distilled into episodes that foreground human motivations ambition, jealousy, loyalty, and betrayal rather than the theological or ritualistic dimensions that dominate traditional commentaries. In this way, Narayan's retellings resonate with readers unfamiliar with Indian cultural contexts, allowing them to engage with the epics as universal narratives of human struggle, rather than as inaccessible religious texts.

The cultural significance of Narayan's work lies in its function as a form of literary diplomacy. By bridging oral and vernacular traditions with English prose, Narayan positioned Indian mythology within the canon of world literature. His retellings became entry points for international audiences, scholars, and students who might otherwise have been daunted by the scale and complexity of the original texts. In this sense, Narayan's contribution was not radical reinterpretation but accessibility he ensured that the epics were not confined to the subcontinent but could resonate universally.

Moreover, Narayan's retellings highlight the timeless human struggles embedded in myth. By stripping away theological density, he revealed the ethical core of the epics: questions of duty, justice, loyalty, and fate. This approach aligns with his larger literary project, seen in novels like *The Guide* and *Malgudi Days*, where ordinary individuals confront extraordinary moral dilemmas. In his epic retellings, Narayan extended this humanist vision to mythic figures, suggesting that even gods and heroes are bound by the same moral ambiguities that define human existence.

Finally, Narayan's retellings underscore the adaptability of myth in modern contexts. By presenting the epics in English prose, he not only democratized access but also demonstrated how myth could be reframed for contemporary audiences without losing its ethical resonance. His work thus occupies a crucial place in Indian English literature, exemplifying how myth can be mobilized as cultural heritage, pedagogical resource, and universal narrative.

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI: FEMINIST RE-VISIONING OF DRAUPADI IN THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) represents one of the most radical feminist interventions in Indian English literature, as it reimagines the *Mahabharata* through the voice of Draupadi. Traditionally, Draupadi has been portrayed as a pawn in the patriarchal epic, her fate determined by the choices of men—her father, her husbands, and her enemies. Divakaruni disrupts this canonical portrayal by granting Draupadi narrative authority, transforming her from a peripheral figure into a central, self-aware narrator. This shift in perspective is not merely stylistic but ideological: it foregrounds female agency in a text historically dominated by male voices, thereby challenging the patriarchal structures embedded in both the epic and its interpretive traditions.

The novel interrogates themes of desire, autonomy, and resistance. Draupadi is presented as a woman who longs for recognition, struggles with her own ambitions, and negotiates power in a male-dominated world. Her relationships with Krishna, Karna, and the Pandavas are reframed to highlight her inner conflicts and emotional depth, rather than reducing her to a symbol of honour or vengeance. By reclaiming Draupadi's voice, Divakaruni aligns with feminist literary traditions in the Global South, where silenced women's narratives are recentered to challenge canonical interpretations.

This reclamation is particularly significant because it situates Draupadi within a continuum of feminist resistance, linking ancient myth to contemporary struggles for gender equality.

Divakaruni's narrative strategy exemplifies mythic revision as resistance. By retelling the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective, she offers alternative epistemologies rooted in gendered experience. The palace itself an illusion created by Maya becomes a metaphor for Draupadi's life: dazzling, fragile, and ultimately shaped by forces beyond her control. Yet within this illusion, Draupadi asserts her voice, her desires, and her agency, refusing to be silenced by tradition. This act of narrative reclamation transforms the epic into a site of feminist critique, where myth is not simply inherited but actively contested and reappropriated.

By situating Draupadi's story within contemporary feminist discourse, Divakaruni demonstrates how myth can be mobilized to articulate new forms of identity and critique. Her work resonates with broader Global South feminist projects that seek to recover marginalized voices and challenge dominant narratives. In this sense, *The Palace of Illusions* is not only a contribution to Indian English literature but also to global feminist mythopoetics. It underscores the adaptability of myth, showing that ancient narratives can be reinterpreted to reflect modern concerns, particularly those of women negotiating power, identity, and autonomy in patriarchal societies.

Ultimately, Divakaruni's retelling highlights the *Mahabharata's* enduring relevance while simultaneously transforming it. By giving Draupadi a voice, she reconfigures the epic's moral and emotional landscape, making it a text that speaks to contemporary readers about desire, agency, and resistance. Her work exemplifies how Indian English literature can engage with Puranic Itihas not as static heritage but as a living narrative, capable of being reshaped to reflect the complexities of modern identity and feminist critique.

AMISH TRIPATHI: POPULAR MYTHIC FICTION AS CULTURAL REBRANDING

Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* (2010–2013) and *Ram Chandra Series* mark a significant new phase in Indian English literature, where mythology is rebranded as accessible, action driven popular fiction. Tripathi's innovation lies in his decision to portray Shiva not as a distant, transcendental deity but as a human leader who attains divinity through his deeds. This democratization of myth makes the narrative relatable to contemporary readers, particularly younger audiences who seek myth not as scripture but as entertainment infused with moral lessons. By humanizing Shiva, Tripathi bridges the gap between ancient epic tradition and modern sensibilities, showing that divinity can be earned through ethical action, courage, and leadership rather than inherited through birth or ritual.

Tripathi's narrative style blends myth with modern storytelling tropes—suspense, romance, political intrigue, and cinematic pacing. His novels read like thrillers, with cliffhangers, battle sequences, and dramatic confrontations that echo the grammar of popular cinema and global fantasy fiction. This stylistic choice positions mythology as a cultural brand for India's soft power in the age of globalization. Just as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* or George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* reimagined Western mythic traditions for mass audiences, Tripathi's works repackage Indian epics for global consumption, ensuring their relevance in the digital marketplace.

At the same time, Tripathi's novels reflect the commodification of myth. Epics that were once sacred texts are transformed into bestselling franchises, complete with sequels, spin-offs, and cinematic adaptations. This commodification does not strip the epics of their ethical resonance; rather, it reframes them as cultural products that can be marketed,

consumed, and shared across diverse audiences. Tripathi's success demonstrates how myth can function simultaneously as heritage and entertainment, as pedagogy and brand. His novels appeal to readers who may not engage with traditional religious texts but are drawn to narratives that combine moral dilemmas with fast-paced storytelling.

Tripathi's contribution, therefore, lies in transforming mythology into a vehicle of cultural diplomacy and identity marketing. By presenting Shiva and Rama as figures who embody universal struggles—leadership, justice, love, and sacrifice—he ensures that ancient narratives remain relevant in the global literary marketplace. His works exemplify how Indian English literature can mobilize *Puranic Itihas* not only as cultural heritage but also as a dynamic resource for rebranding India's identity in the twenty-first century. In this way, Tripathi's mythic fiction becomes part of a larger Global South project, where indigenous traditions are re-imagined to assert cultural presence and soft power in a globalized world.

ARUNDHATI ROY: MYTHIC ECHOES IN KERALA'S SOCIO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), though not a direct retelling of the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*, is suffused with mythic echoes and allegorical motifs that resonate with Puranic archetypes. Roy's narrative transforms Kerala's landscape into a mythic space where caste hierarchies, colonial legacies, and personal trauma intersect, creating a text that is simultaneously local in its rootedness and universal in its thematic reach. The novel's structure, with its cyclical temporality and fragmented memory, mirrors the mythic pattern of recurrence and return, suggesting that history itself functions as an epic cycle in which individuals are trapped.

Roy employs mythic imagery to frame her critique of social injustice and fractured modernity. The forbidden love between Ammu and Velutha recalls archetypal narratives of transgression and exile, echoing mythic tales where desire collides with social order. The exile motif, whether in the form of Velutha's ostracization or Estha's displacement, resonates with Puranic archetypes of banishment and return. Cyclical memory, a central narrative device in the novel, parallels mythic structures where time is not linear but recursive, binding characters to trauma that repeats across generations. In this way, Roy demonstrates how mythic structures can illuminate the hidden fractures of society, exposing the persistence of ancient hierarchies within modern contexts.

Her use of myth is subtle, functioning as cultural subtext rather than overt narrative. Unlike Narayan's accessible retellings or Tripathi's popular rebranding, Roy does not foreground myth as the central storyline. Instead, she embeds mythic resonance within the fabric of realist fiction, enriching the allegorical depth of her narrative. This strategy allows her to critique caste oppression, gender inequality, and colonial residue while simultaneously situating these struggles within a mythic framework that transcends the immediate socio political context. Myth becomes metaphor, allegory, and echo an undercurrent that shapes the reader's perception of Kerala's fractured modernity.

By weaving myth into contemporary socio political critique, Roy demonstrates its adaptability in modern fiction. Her narrative underscores that mythology is not confined to epic retellings but can permeate realist literature as metaphor and allegory. This adaptability is crucial in the Global South context, where myth often functions as a counter narrative to colonial modernity. Roy's work exemplifies how Indian English literature can mobilize myth not as static heritage but as a dynamic lens for interrogating social hierarchies, cultural trauma, and political injustice.

Ultimately, *The God of Small Things* situates Roy within the broader tradition of mythic modernism, in which writers like Salman Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez employ mythic structures to narrate fractured identities and histories. Roy's contribution lies in her ability to embed mythic echoes within the intimate details of everyday life, showing that even in realist fiction, myth remains a powerful tool for articulating the complexities of human experience in postcolonial societies.

SALMAN RUSHDIE: NATION AS EPIC NARRATIVE IN MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) is one of the most celebrated works of Indian English literature, and it represents a radical reconfiguration of myth in the service of national narrative. The novel positions the Indian nation itself as a mythic protagonist, born at the stroke of independence in 1947. Rushdie employs the techniques of magical realism, epic scale, and mythic archetypes to narrate India's fractured identity, blending myth and history into a single narrative fabric. In doing so, he transforms the story of India's independence and partition into a modern epic, in which myth serves as a lens through which collective trauma and identity are articulated.

The protagonist, Saleem Sinai, embodies the nation's destiny, echoing the mythic heroes whose lives are intertwined with cosmic events. His birth at the exact moment of independence symbolizes the fusion of personal and national histories, while his telepathic connection with the other "midnight's children" reflects the multiplicity and diversity of India itself. Saleem's fragmented body and psyche mirror the fractured identity of the nation, suggesting that the individual and the collective are bound by mythic patterns of destiny, sacrifice, and renewal. In this way, Rushdie reimagines the epic hero not as a singular figure of triumph but as a flawed, vulnerable character whose struggles reflect the complexities of postcolonial identity.

Rushdie's blending of myth and history exemplifies Global South strategies of rewriting national narratives through mythopoetic lenses. Myth becomes a tool for reimagining history, critiquing colonial legacies, and articulating the contradictions of modern nationhood. By infusing historical events—the Emergency, partition, linguistic conflicts—with mythic resonance, Rushdie demonstrates how myth can illuminate the symbolic dimensions of political and social upheaval. His narrative strategy situates Indian English literature within a global tradition of mythic modernism, comparable to Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in Latin America, where magical realism and myth are used to narrate collective histories of trauma and resistance.

The novel also underscores the adaptability of myth in modern contexts. Rushdie does not retell the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata* directly; instead, he mobilizes mythic structures birth at a cosmic moment, heroic destiny, fragmentation, exile, and renewal to frame the story of India's independence. This indirect use of myth highlights its flexibility as a narrative resource, capable of being reshaped to reflect contemporary realities. By transforming the nation into an epic narrative, Rushdie demonstrates how myth can be mobilized not only to preserve cultural heritage but also to critique and reimagine history.

Ultimately, *Midnight's Children* situates Rushdie as a central figure in Indian English literature and global postcolonial writing. His work exemplifies how myth can be re appropriated to articulate new forms of identity, blending the personal with the national, the historical with the mythic, and the local with the global. In this way, Rushdie's novel becomes both a myth of India and a myth of modernity, showing that the epic form remains vital in narrating the complexities of postcolonial existence.

SYNTHESIS: INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE AND MYTHIC

Together, these five authors illustrate the diverse spectrum of mythic revision in Indian English literature, each mobilizing *Puranic Itihas* and mythic structures in distinct ways that reflect their literary vision and socio cultural context.

- **R.K. Narayan** translates the epics into accessible prose, stripping away theological density to highlight ethical dilemmas and human choices. His contribution lies in cultural diplomacy, ensuring that India's mythic heritage resonates with global audiences.
- **Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni** reclaims silenced female voices by re-visioning Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions*. Her feminist retelling foregrounds agency, desire, and resistance, situating myth within Global South feminist discourse.
- **Amish Tripathi** rebrands mythology as popular fiction, democratizing divinity by portraying Shiva as a human leader. His cinematic storytelling style commodifies myth for mass consumption, positioning it as a cultural brand in the age of globalization.
- **Arundhati Roy** embeds mythic allegory into socio political critique. In *The God of Small Things*, mythic echoes of exile, forbidden love, and cyclical memory enrich her realist narrative, exposing caste hierarchies and colonial residues through allegorical depth.
- **Salman Rushdie** transforms the nation itself into an epic protagonist in *Midnight's Children*. Through magical realism and mythic archetypes, he narrates India's fractured identity, blending personal and national destinies in a mythic modernist framework comparable to García Márquez.

This diversity underscores how Indian English literature mobilizes *Puranic Itihas* not merely as static heritage but as a **living, adaptive narrative**. Myth becomes a flexible resource—translated for accessibility, reclaimed for feminist resistance, rebranded for popular culture, embedded in socio-political allegory, and transformed into national epic. Collectively, these strategies demonstrate the vitality of myth in shaping identity, pedagogy, and global literary imagination, situating Indian English literature firmly within the broader currents of Global South literatures and mythic modernism.

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