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## FROM RAMAYANA TO REALISM: MYTHIC STRUCTURES IN INDIAN ENGLISH NARRATIVES

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### Abstract

*This paper investigates how mythic structures derived from the Ramayana—one of India's foundational epics—continues to shape narrative techniques, themes, and character formations in Indian English literature. It examines the transition from the epic's traditional mythic framework to contemporary realist literary narratives, showing how myth operates both as cultural memory and as a narrative resource that enriches realism. By analyzing selected works in Indian English fiction—ranging from novelistic retellings to myth-inflected realist narratives—this study argues that mythic structures are not merely referenced but reimagined to address modern concerns of identity, ethics, gender, and postcolonial subjectivity. The persistence of mythic frameworks in contemporary storytelling reflects an ongoing negotiation between India's past and present literary aesthetics.*

### Keywords

*Ramayana, Mythic Structures, Indian English Literature, Literary Realism, Archetypes, etc.*

### Full Article

#### **Introduction:**

The Ramayana has occupied a central role in South Asian literary and cultural consciousness for millennia. Valmiki's epic, composed as an *Itihasa* (history and myth), narrates the life and trials of Rama, embodying ideals of duty (dharma) and social order that have become cultural touchstones in Indian societies. Modern scholarship on the Ramayana emphasizes its multifarious narrative structures and enduring symbolic frameworks that resonate through oral, written, and performed traditions across centuries.

In Indian English literature, many contemporary authors do not merely repeat epic narratives; they reconfigure mythic frameworks to serve new artistic, ethical, and cultural purposes. This movement from myth to literary realism illustrates how ancient structures maintain relevance by adapting to modern narrative contexts. This paper explores this dynamic transition—how mythic structures from the Ramayana inform Indian English narratives, transforming epic archetypes and symbolic patterns into devices of literary realism.

#### **Mythic Structures and Literary Realism:**

Mythic structures are the deep narrative patterns and archetypal roles that underpin epic texts like the Ramayana. These include the hero's journey, the exile motif, and the dharma dilemma, all of which carry symbolic weight beyond their surface actions. Literary realism, by contrast,



emphasizes representation of everyday life, individual psychology, social institutions, and material conditions. In Indian English narratives, myth and realism intersect: mythic archetypes provide symbolic grounding, while realist techniques render characters and contexts accessible to contemporary readers.

Theoretical models of adaptation and mythopoesis suggest that this intersection generates new meanings—mythic material becomes a cultural memory that infuses realist narratives with ethical depth and symbolic resonance.

### **Ramayana as Cultural Memory in Indian English Literature:**

The Ramayana itself functions as a cultural repository with fluid narrative trajectories that extend beyond its canonical text. Across time, multiple recensions, interpretations, and localized tellings demonstrate the epic's capacity to evolve while sustaining its core structures. Contemporary scholarship on its transformation emphasizes how these mythic narratives serve as collective memory—a shared cultural framework through which subsequent literature engages with ethical, social, and aesthetic questions.

### **Mythic Structures in Indian English Narratives: Retelling and Reimagining:**

Some Indian English works engage directly with epic narratives, reshaping mythic structures into modern literary forms. Novels such as *The Palace of Illusions* (retelling the Mahabharata through Draupadi's perspective) or *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (recasting Sita's story from the Ramayana) illustrates how mythic frameworks are re-presented to foreground marginalized voices and modern concerns like feminism, agency, and subjectivity. These texts preserve the skeleton of mythic structures—heroic quests, moral dilemmas, and cosmic orders—but infuse them with interiority and realism, creating narratives that feel both ancient and urgent.

Indian English literature frequently draws upon mythic structures derived from foundational epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Rather than merely reproducing sacred narratives traditionally attributed to Valmiki and Vyasa, contemporary writers reinterpret these mythic frameworks to address modern questions of gender, nationhood, caste, diaspora, and identity. Myth in Indian English narratives functions not as static inheritance but as a dynamic narrative architecture, one that shapes plot, character, symbolism, and ideological discourse.

### **Myth as Narrative Pattern:**

Northrop Frye proposed that literature evolves from mythic archetypes—quest, fall, sacrifice, exile, rebirth. These structures recur across genres and historical periods.

In Indian English fiction, mythic structures provide archetypal templates. It anchors narratives in cultural memory and create intertextual resonance. The idea of intertextuality, developed by Julia Kristeva, suggests that texts exist in dialogue with prior narratives. Retellings of Indian epics operate as palimpsests—modern texts layered upon ancient mythic foundations. Reimagining thus becomes a creative act of reinterpretation rather than imitation. Myths act as repositories of collective memory. In postcolonial India, revisiting mythic structures becomes a way to negotiate national identity. Myths also serve as civilizational pride. Myths help to authenticate global literary presence. Mythic frameworks provide continuity amidst socio-political change.

Works such as *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni retell epic narratives from the perspectives of Draupadi and Sita. In these narrations she maintains the mythic structure intact by keeping exile, humiliation, war etc. as presented in epic texts. The only change she makes is the change in narrative focus, which shifts to



marginalized voices. The basic point of view is the interrogation of patriarchal authority. Thus, the myth becomes a feminist counter-discourse.

In *The Great Indian Novel*, ShashiTharoor maps the *Mahabharata* onto Indian political history. The Kurukshetra war becomes an allegory for colonialism, nationalism, and post-independence politics. Mythic structure thus becomes a satirical lens through which modern history is interpreted.

Amish Tripathi, in *The Shiva Trilogy* and *Ram Chandra Series*, retains epic plot frameworks but rationalizes divine elements. The main characteristics of his novels are demythologization of miracles and dumanization of gods. Amish successfully narrate political contextualization of dharma. The mythic structure remains but is historicized and modernized.

The major narrative strategies in reimagining of the epics are focalization shift, telling the epic from secondary or silenced perspectives. The psychological aspect is found when archetypal heroes are transformed into conflicted modern subjects. Another strategy of narration is applied by setting mythic patterns within contemporary or alternative historical contexts. The genres are blended as epic, satire, realism, fantasy, and historiographic metafiction are mixed and hybrid genres are created.

Mythic structures in Indian English narratives negotiate tension between tradition and modernity. It often reciprocates between sacred authority and secular rationalism. Myth also stretches between the thin line of collective memory and individual identity. Rather than rejecting myth, modern writers reinterpret it to make it relevant to contemporary ethical dilemmas—leadership crises, gender politics, social inequality, and national belonging.

Retelling is not merely aesthetic experimentation. It performs critical cultural work by challenging canonical authority. These retellings recover subaltern voices. The focus is also intended to reclaim indigenous narratives in global literary markets. Myths and its retellings reconstruct ethical paradigms. Through reinterpretation, myth becomes dialogic rather than doctrinal.

Mythic structures in Indian English narratives persist because they are flexible. Retelling and reimagining transform epic frameworks into living discourse. Whether through feminist revision, political allegory, or popular mythological fiction, contemporary authors demonstrate that myth is not a relic of the past but a renewable narrative resource.

The endurance of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* lies not in their fixity but in their capacity for reinterpretation. Indian English literature thus emerges as a vibrant site where ancient structures meet modern consciousness.

### **Symbolic Realism in Contemporary Fiction:**

Other Indian English fiction does not retell myth directly but incorporates mythic structures into realist settings. For example, short story cycles or novels that evoke *Ramayana* structures—such as exile, return, or transgression—use these as archetypal backdrops for urban or postcolonial narratives. These works often use mythic motifs symbolically to explore issues like migration, identity, and ethical conflict in contemporary life. Although not direct retellings, they bear structural echoes of epic narrative logic, indicating how mythic elements inform realist plots

Contemporary Indian English fiction often negotiates the tension between realism and myth. While modern narratives foreground social reality—urbanization, caste hierarchies, gender politics, migration—they simultaneously draw upon mythic structures rooted in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, traditionally attributed to Valmiki and Vyasa.

This convergence produces what may be termed symbolic realism—a narrative mode in which realistic settings and psychological depth coexist with mythic archetypes and symbolic



patterns. Myth does not appear as overt fantasy; instead, it operates as a structural and symbolic undercurrent shaping character, conflict, and thematic resonance.

Northrop Frye argues that literature evolves from mythic archetypes—quest, exile, fall, sacrifice, rebirth. These narrative patterns continue to inform modern realist fiction, even when explicit mythological references are absent. In Indian English narratives, mythic structures provide archetypal frameworks, ethical paradigms and cultural continuity.

The concept of intertextuality, articulated by Julia Kristeva, suggests that texts exist in dialogue with earlier texts. Contemporary Indian fiction often embeds epic echoes within realist narratives. Simultaneously, myths function as cultural memory systems—repositories of shared identity and ethical discourse.

Symbolic realism differs from magical realism. Rather than introducing supernatural elements, it embeds mythic symbolism within plausible settings. It uses archetypes as psychological motifs and reinterprets epic conflicts as social struggles. The result is layered narrative meaning: literal realism on the surface, mythic resonance beneath.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni retains the mythic arc of Draupadi's humiliation and war but grounds it in psychological introspection. The epic war becomes a metaphor for patriarchal politics. This narration is a symbolic struggle for female agency. It also underlines reflection of contemporary gender discourse. The realism of emotional conflict coexists with mythic structure.

In *The Great Indian Novel*, Shashi Tharoor reimagines the *Mahabharata* as a satirical retelling of India's political history. Symbolic realism functions through character mapping by projecting epic heroes as political leaders. In this novel battle of *kurukshetra* become a national conflict – Indian Independence Movement and the political events after independence. Dharma becomes constitutional debate in narration as well in characterization of the novel. Thus, the mythic structure provides interpretive scaffolding for historical realism.

Amish Tripathi's *The Shiva Trilogy* and *Ram Chandra Series* exemplify symbolic realism in popular mythological fiction. Although framed within ancient and imaginary/mythological settings, the divine events receive scientific explanations. These narrations present gods as historical leaders. Amish present moral dilemmas as replacements for cosmic intervention. The mythic savior archetype becomes a socially embedded reformer. The epic war in these novels becomes geopolitical conflict.

Symbolic realism frequently employs archetypes. Indian novels based on myths use certain archetypes from myths to make realistic transformation. Archetype of the exile in the form of Rama's forest exile represents social alienation and political displacement. The archetype of the warrior through the characters as Arjuna and Shiva represents ethical leadership in crisis. The archetype of the mother in characters of Kunti and Sita represents negotiations of duty and autonomy. The archetype of the shadow through the figures of Ravana and Karna represent the marginalised and morally ambiguous figures. These archetypes function symbolically, enriching the psychological and thematic complexity of contemporary narratives.

Modern Indian cities often become symbolic *Kurukshetras*—spaces of moral conflict and identity struggle. The battlefield is no longer literal but ideological. It represents corporate rivalry, electoral politics. Sometimes it extends to the realms of gender negotiation and diasporic tension. Mythic resonance intensifies the realism of these contexts.

In symbolic realism, *dharma* shifts from divine decree to ethical dilemma. Characters face conflicts between law and justice, tradition versus reform and even personal desire versus collective duty. The epic moral universe is internalized into individual conscience.

Mythic structures in Indian English narratives persist not as ornamental references but as symbolic frameworks embedded within realism. Contemporary writers reinterpret epic patterns to



question authority, reconstruct gender roles, critique political systems and preserve cultural memory. Symbolic realism demonstrates that myth and modernity are not opposites. Instead, myth operates as a subterranean structure informing contemporary consciousness. Indian English fiction thus becomes a dialogic space where epic memory intersects with social reality.

### **Moral and Ethical Archetypes:**

A persistent feature of both mythic and realist narratives in Indian English literature is the use of moral and ethical archetypes—such as the dharma bound hero or the devoted companion—that trace back to Ramayana. These archetypes are adapted to address modern ethical landscapes (e.g., feminism, secular democracy, postcolonial identity), demonstrating the flexibility of mythic structures in accommodating realist concerns.

Indian English literature repeatedly returns to myth not merely for narrative material but for ethical inquiry. The foundational epics—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, traditionally attributed to Valmiki and Vyasa—are structured around profound moral dilemmas rather than simplistic moral certainties. Contemporary Indian English writers inherit these mythic structures and reinterpret them within modern socio-political realities.

In this context, myth functions as an ethical framework. Moral and ethical archetypes—such as the righteous king, the conflicted warrior, the sacrificial mother, the marginalized outsider—reappear in contemporary fiction as symbolic templates through which modern anxieties are negotiated.

Carl Jung conceptualized archetypes as universal psychic patterns. When applied to literature, these patterns become ethical prototypes. Similarly, Northrop Frye argued that mythic structures provide literature with recurring narrative and moral frameworks.

In Indian English narratives, archetypes function not only symbolically but normatively—they propose, question, or subvert ethical models inherited from epic tradition. Rama in the *Ramayana* embodies ideal kingship—moral restraint, adherence to dharma, and personal sacrifice for public good. In the *Ram Chandra Series*, Amish Tripathi recasts Rama as a law-bound constitutional reformer. The ethical archetype of the righteous king is relocated into political realism, where dharma becomes legal accountability rather than divine command. Similarly, in *The Great Indian Novel*, Shashi Tharoor transforms epic figures into political leaders, turning mythic kingship into commentary on democratic governance. The archetype evolves from divine sovereignty to ethical leadership under public scrutiny.

Arjuna in the *Mahabharata* embodies moral hesitation—his crisis on the battlefield foregrounds the ethical complexity of violence. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni recontextualizes epic warriors within psychological realism. War becomes symbolic of internal and relational conflict rather than purely cosmic duty. Modern narratives thus foreground ethical uncertainty, emotional vulnerability and critique of absolutist morality. The warrior archetype becomes a study in conscience rather than conquest.

Figures like *Sita* and *Kunti* symbolize endurance, sacrifice, and maternal devotion. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita narrates her own experience, transforming sacrifice into conscious ethical choice rather than imposed submission. The feminine archetype evolves from passive virtue to moral agency, from silent endurance to reflective critique and from symbolic purity to ethical subjectivity. This reinterpretation interrogates patriarchal constructions of virtue embedded in myth.

Characters such as Karna represent honor amid social exclusion. In *The Shiva Trilogy*, Amish Tripathi portrays the Nagas—initially perceived as monstrous—as socially marginalized individuals. The moral focus shifts from demonization to empathy. The archetype of the “Other”



becomes a critique of systemic injustice, a challenge to purity hierarchies and a reflection on social exclusion. Ethics thus shifts from cosmic battle to structural reform.

In epic tradition, dharma is often perceived as divine law. Contemporary Indian English narratives reinterpret dharma as contextual moral reasoning and conflict between personal desire and collective duty. It also reinterprets as negotiation between tradition and reform. Rather than presenting absolute moral truths, modern fiction dramatizes ethical ambiguity. In contemporary settings, mythic moral archetypes operate within political corruption, gender negotiation, class and caste inequality and diasporic identity. Urban spaces become symbolic *Kurukshetras*—sites of ethical confrontation. Mythic structures intensify realism by embedding everyday struggles within archetypal patterns. Contemporary writers frequently destabilize epic moral hierarchies where villains gain psychological depth and heroes exhibit flaws and doubt. It represents ethical certainty replaced by moral complexity. This shift reflects modern philosophical scepticism and democratic discourse.

Mythic structures in Indian English narratives endure because they provide durable ethical frameworks. However, contemporary writers do not merely replicate epic morality; they interrogate and reinterpret it. Moral and ethical archetypes—righteous king, conflicted warrior, sacrificial mother, marginalized outsider—are reimagined to address modern dilemmas of governance, gender, justice, and identity. Myth becomes an ethical laboratory rather than a doctrinal script. Thus, Indian English fiction transforms epic memory into living moral discourse, demonstrating that myth remains central to contemporary ethical imagination.

### **Discussion: From Epic Timelessness to Narrative Realism:**

The transition from mythic storytelling to realism in Indian English literature does not represent a simple break with tradition. Instead, it reflects a continuum in which mythic structures are re-contextualized: ancient narrative patterns are reshaped to address contemporary concerns, while realism enriches mythic archetypes with psychological and social specificity. This dynamic interplay allows Indian English narratives to maintain cultural rootedness while fostering literary innovation. The Ramayana provides a foundational mythic architecture, which authors selectively adapt to create narratives that resonate with modern sensibilities, ethical concerns, and aesthetic expectations. Such adaptation underscores the transformative potential of myth—not fixed or frozen in antiquity, but mobile and responsive to changing cultural imaginaries.

### **Conclusion:**

The movement from the Ramayana to realism in Indian English narratives illustrates how mythic structures endure as generative elements within modern literature. Far from being relics of the past, mythic frameworks—especially those derived from the Ramayana—continue to shape narrative strategies, thematic concerns, and archetypal patterns in Indian English fiction. By integrating mythic structures into realist narratives, contemporary writers create literature that honours cultural memory while addressing the complexities of modern life. In this convergence lies the enduring vitality of India's mythic heritage—a resource for realism, a bridge between past and present, and a framework for literary innovation.

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