Rewriting: Nature, Features and Ideology

Rewriting is a revisiting or reinterpretation of an established canonical text with an alternate perspective that provides a new insight to the source text, either by questioning the ideological thrust of the original rendition by looking at it through a new and alternate perspective, or by complying with the earlier perspective. It has the potential to assume many forms, including the updating of classic stories, generic experimentation and challenges to the canon. Functionally too rewriting as a significant genre springs from the political margins, acting as an answer to canonical literature’s assertions of authenticity and originality. Adrienne Rich, in her article “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”, published in journal College English calls these writings as “revision” and defines it as the “act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction”. Thus, rewriting is a discourse that resists the power agencies and ideologies of hegemonic or subjugating social structures, providing the ‘other’ (who is strategically marginalized in source text) an opportunity to make its presence marked in his/her version and representation of the story. Rewriting, thus, helps in challenging the canon and inscribing the experience of the marginal subject. It celebrates the perspectives of many unsung characters in the source text. The dominating voice (which is a representative of certain ideology) finds an echo in the dominant discourse of a particular era and its narrative becomes the focal point of the text. While rewriting such a text from a new perspective, this dominant ideology
is contested and challenged exposing the subjugating elements of that text and thwarting the dominant ideology. This makes rewriting a deliberate political attempt that shifts the master-center of mainstream rendition to another character whose perspective might affect, change or challenge the ideology of the source text. In such rewritings, the narrative is recreated in such a way that attempts to breakdown the ideologies and voices put forth by the mainstream rendition. It brings the peripheral characters to the centre. Major characters and events are replaced by minor characters giving them an opportunity to articulate an alternate version of the story. Rewritings, thus, expose the suppressed notions of a text that has remained unchallenged for a long time by giving voice to a character that has remained subjugated over a long period of time. This shift in voice provides a new alternative to the source text by uncovering certain covert, unsettled questions which go unanswered or is not even raised in the mainstream rendition. Rewritings, thus by intervening in the narratives seek space for the subjugated and marginalized.

Rewritings suggest a reinvestigation of the past. Now the question arises-why do we need to reinvestigate the past? Does the past show any sign of suppression and marginalization of certain sections of a particular society and rewriting in a way exposes this? History, at times is characterized as a chock-a-block for a certain section of society and its rendition fails to satisfy their representation as well as their questions. Rewriting, thus, by exposing this discontent looks for possible alternatives where the characters from the margin are also provided an opportunity of representation. There is an obvious lack of space for the strategically
‘other’ in the mainstream rendition and this lack speaks of the political or ideological commitment of the age in which it is composed. The silence in the text implicitly provides evidence of how a particular section is marginalized and relegated to the periphery. In rewritings, this marginalized section is provided an opportunity to occupy the center and speak. The master centre of the narrative is shifted that eventually ends in shifting of power from one character to another. The text when looked from a new perspective highlights certain covert or misinterpreted facts or notions which when brought to light raises certain unsettled questions and issues which do not form a part of the mainstream text and also questions the relevance of the mainstream rendition exposing the hidden politics of subjugation in canonical writings as well. The source text which could have been celebrated as a canonical text or ignored as an irrelevant text might become very important by looking at it from a new perspective. But the question is- what leads to the change in perspective and why is a text rewritten?

For a Marxist critic, there always exists an ideology embedded in a text. Marxist critics call ideology a, ‘false consciousness’, ‘the system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man [sic] or a social group’ (Althusser 1977, 149), which dominates the popular discourse of the time. Andrew Bennet and Nicholos Royle in *An Introduction to literature, criticism and theory* (2009) remark that Ideology is not, “a set of doctrines”: rather, it “signifies the way men [sic] live out their roles in class-society, the values, ideas and images which tie them by their social functions and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a
whole”(172). The post-liberal humanist phase vehemently rejects the non-committed, apolitical function of literature. A text is, thus, a cauldron of objective with a host of purposes to serve and elaborate and an ideology to celebrate that is knitted disingenuously. A text is embedded within a particular ideology and becomes a representative of a particular socio-historical situation. E. C Cuff, W. W. Sharrock and D W Francis in their work *Perspectives in Sociology* define discourse as a “way of speaking/writing and operate according to rules, being rules an output of socio-historical arrangements and circumstances.”(256). It makes the prevalent ideology, an inseparable part of text, present explicitly or implicitly in it. The ideology that the text exhibits or opposes displays the power structure and power relations in it establishing that text is a carrier of power of dominating ideology.

An author cannot be separated from his/ her cultural background and the culture is deeply engraved in its literary output. Rewritings also have their own ideologies which can be conformist or non-conformist as per the author’s objective. But with this reinterpretation the source text suddenly becomes alive. A text when written to resist, exposes the power structure of the source text and its hidden implications. It therefore shifts the character having the central position in the text with another character highlighting many covert implications of the text. There are many rewritings which play an investigative role to uncover the repressive ideological implication of the source text as well as the politics behind celebration of such repressing notions. Rewriting is not a mere act of representation by a new voice
but also involves the highlighting and scrutinizing the notion of power, ideology and structure embedded in the source text.

Let us consider some of the significant rewritings from across the world of literature.

To begin with, Homer’s *Iliad* which is believed to have been composed around 8th century BC and is one of the greatest writings to have been composed in the West. One of the most celebrated stories of Greek mythology (and also a part of popular folklore), the narrative is based on the Trojan War that covers a few weeks in the final year of the war. The characters of Homer’s epic are Greek legends and great warriors. Derek Walcott in his magnum opus, *Omeros* (1990) has re-imagined this classic tale of wars of legend in a new setting and characters. While the former one is set in the grand city of Troy *Omeros* is set in the Caribbean island of St. Lucia and the characters are also not of royal heritage but fishermen. *Omeros* exposes how the epic tradition in past has been oblivious and insensitive to the real problems of the underprivileged section of the society and this makes *Iliad* a narrative exclusively based on a clan indulged in war. Walcott's narrative is both an epic and anti-epic. He adopts the epic conventions only to reject them, reinvent them, or rework them.

Another narrative *Robinson Crusoe*, (1719) one of the pioneering English novels, at the elementary level talks about the adventurous journey of Robinson Crusoe to an isolated island, populated with some primitive barbaric population and his return after 28 years. Crusoe meets Friday, a native of the island...
during his journey and makes him his slave. Not only this, he also teaches him some English and converts him to the Christianity. This makes the narrative a representation of expanding colonial empire in the eighteenth century England and justifies the idea of civilizing the uncivilized primitive folk of the East through western model of language and culture. J. M. Coetzee in his novel Foe (1986) which is a retelling of Robinson Crusoe attacks this idea of ‘white man’s burden’ of civilizing the so called ‘primitive folks’ and highlights the politics behind promotion of this kind of ideology. He also exposes how the act of colonization and the lingual and religious conversion were intertwined and were deliberate actions of state and not a naïve act merely aiming at welfare of the colonized. An important intervention that the novel makes is introduction of a female character in the masculine world of Crusoe which can also be read as feminist intervention in a masculine world. Foe as the rewriting of Robinson Crusoe attempts at highlighting many of the political implications of a text.

Another novel that has been critically analyzed and interpreted extensively by critics and charged with many covert implications is Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre (1719). Primarily a bildungsroman, the novel runs as a narrative of orphaned Jane, and her life and experience in a charity school, then as a governess and later as a lover and wife. But later readings of this canonical English novel have located elements of colonial subjugation and violence as well as female subjugation in this novel and Jean Rhys wrote Wild Sargasso Sea (1966) as an attempt to locate the elements of subjugation in Jane Eyre as a feminist and postcolonial response to it.
Rhys’ protagonist Antoinette Cosway is Rhys’ version of Brontë's devilish "madwoman in the attic”. The text brings to light the treatment meted out to colonized people in the writings of the colonizer. *Wild Sargasso Sea* exposes the racist as well as sexist ideology of the Western texts and their representation of the colonized.

*The Tempest* (1610) by William Shakespeare is again a play charged with the misrepresentation of the colonized people in Western writings especially after the popularity of postcolonial discourse. The story is set in a remote island where Prospero, the rightful Duke of Milan, plans and plots to restore her daughter Miranda, her legacy and place in Milan. He has enslaved Ariel, whom he freed from Sycorax, an Algerian sorceress and Caliban, a native of the island which is now ruled by him (Prospero) after replacing Sycorax. Aime Cesaire, a major postcolonial theorist has rewritten the postcolonial adaptation of the play and named it as *A Tempest* (1969). By calling the conquered land a Caribbean island and Caliban a black slave, the novel exposes the entire colonial project of subjugating the natives in the garb of the civilizing mission.

Another celebrated rewriting of all time is John Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost* (1667). Based on Biblical theme of the fall of man from the Garden of Eden, the epic opens with an explicit purpose to "justifie the wayes of God to men" (2). But despite dealing with the religious theme, Milton cunningly switches to the opposite side and joins in the revolt against authoritative forces and sounds anti-establishment making the theme ever pulsating. John Leonard in the introduction of the epic calls
this based on Civil War. In *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793) poet William Blake famously wrote, "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it." (6)

These are few examples to show that rewriting is not entirely a novel concept and has been used strategically by postcolonial or feminist writers to serve a variety of purposes. Rewriting, by providing a new coloring of imagination makes the source text a new text and also a part of the continued tradition. Rewritings are written by making class, gender or nation the locus but have a commitment to highlight certain incidents or covert intentions which are different from the mainstream rendition. The approach to the text might be different from the approach of the original author. The above examples show ample evidences and examples of political commitments of a text as well as resisting implication of its rewriting and different grounds on which a text can be based. A text can be rewritten on multiple grounds. For example, the colonizer’s representation of the colonized world has frequently been challenged and interrogated in postcolonial writings. The racist ideology has been critically catechized in the colonizer’s writings and representations. Likewise, the feminist interpretation and version of texts highlight many stereotyped representations of women characters in the texts, as well as their subjugation. This indicates that many schools of criticism like feminism and postcolonialism celebrate the phenomena of rewriting and use it as a resistance against the domination and subjugation by writing back to the patriarchy and empire
respectively. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin assert that postcolonial rewritings can be understood according to a model by which the “Empire writes back” to the “imperial center.” Rewritten texts, also termed as ‘revisionist texts’, thus attempt to look into the subjugating ideology of a text which had been overlooked by early recipients of the text.

There can be a variety of rewritings based on the objective and ideological underpinnings of the writer. Few rewritings with alternative ideologies have already been discussed in the chapter. Adaptation is also one of the aspects of rewriting. M. H. Abrams in *An Introduction to the Literary Terms* (2005) describes adaptation as adapting of a literary source to another genre or medium with a new objective. He points out that the adaptation creates a new story, different from the original rendition. Narrative and characters become independent of the original even though both are based on the original, in terms of genesis. On the other hand, translation is also categorized as type of rewriting as translation, besides being a linguistic attempt is also an ideological one where the ideology of the translator also becomes a part of the text, making the text anew thus making it a new writing. Berrin Askoy in “Translation as Rewriting: The Concept and Its Implications on the Emergence of a National Literature” (1914) says,

Translation has never been an isolated activity. There is always a context in which translation takes place, a history from which a text emerges and another one into which a text is transposed. Translation has always served a
special purpose or many purposes at the same time, and each time it has been shaped a certain force, power, or reason. (3)

The concept of “translation as rewriting” has been put forward by Andre Lefevere in *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (2013). In the text, Lefevere formally present his theory in which they proclaim that “translation is a rewriting of an original text”. He writes,

Translation is another type of rewriting (along with, for instance, anthologies, historical books, criticism etc.) motivated by the ideology and poetics of people who hold some kind of power or use rewriting to gain power in the target culture (Lefevere discusses this as ‘patronage’… rewriters can create images not just of a work but also of a writer, a genre and of a whole period. (viii)

He also elaborates his concept by projecting rewriting as manipulative in essence targeting a new section. As quoted in an article from “Translation as Rewriting” (2014) by Ren Shuping in *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Lefevere referred to any text produced on the basis of another with the intention of adapting that other text to a certain ideology or to a certain poetics and, usually, to both. (56). Lefevere in his work also writes,

All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power,
and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society. Rewriting can introduce new concepts, new genres, new devices and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation, of the shaping power of one culture upon another. But rewriting can also repress innovation, distort and contain, and in an age of ever increasing manipulation of all kinds, the study of the manipulation processes of literature are exemplified by translation can help us towards a greater awareness of the world in which we live.” (56)

Translation is regarded by Lefevere as “the most obviously recognizable type of rewriting, and potentially the most influential because it is able to project the image of an author and/or a (series of) work (s) in another culture, lifting that author and/or those works beyond the boundaries of their culture of origin”. (TRMLF,9).

Also, Theo Hermans, a scholar of translation studies in his book Translation in Systems: Descriptive and System-oriented Approaches Explained (1999) writes that rewriting includes translation, criticism, reviewing, summary, adaptation for children, anthologizing, making into a comic strip or TV film, and so on. As far as the rewritings based on the Ramayana or the Mahabharata is concerned, having a strong hold over masses, Indian epics have been presented in almost every genre offering multiple versions of the narratives. Right from bedtime stories to oral folksongs to TV shows to movies, there is seen ample evidence of experimentation and multiple perspectives of the texts always making the age old stories afresh and anew.
As the chapter has elaborated the concept and phenomenon of rewriting, it is to be mentioned that the thesis is restricted to the rewritings of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata which are based on the issue of gender and caste. Mythological stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have justified or advocated a specific kind of ideal social order that has to be followed by the world for proper and smooth functioning of day to day human affairs. As both the epics present God ‘incarnated’ as human as an integral part of the text and story’s central character, they also celebrate the view that the choices and ideals presented in the epic are not just human acts but acts of God that cannot be questioned or refuted. The sacred status given to these epics helped in making them works that resist interrogation and critical questioning. But writers across the globe have frequently revisited them with fresh perspectives. Such rewritings challenge many of the notions relating to values, social practice, and political ethics etc that have had significant ideological gradient. Thus a new writer who is resistant in his outlook towards the epics and critical in his approach emerges with change in social perception and ideology.

Apart from the writer, there has also been a shift in reading practice of the reader. A new class of readers with alternate perspectives also emerged with the changing social discourses. This shift in social discourses and new approaches not only helped in evolution of the writer but reader as well and the omniscient status of the writer has come under scrutiny. Texts like the Ramayana or the Mahabharata that enjoy a revered status also has come under scrutiny. This new reader, like contemporary writer also has approach that can be equally conformist or non-
conformist in tone and he might agree or disagree with the previous renditions or responses of many characters. This resistant reader has her ideological frame which might not concord with the prevalent meaning and interpretation of the story. This shift in reading or re-narrating the same story with fresh approaches makes epic like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* a part of living tradition.

Epics not only reflect the milieu in which they are created, but also have a lasting impact on milieus that follow. Hence, to disassociate epics from culture is impossible. However, the very notion of an epic suggests a hierarchal world order with a hero who is able to transcend seemingly insurmountable difficulties to succeed in a quest that others find too daunting to even contemplate. Such a hierarchal world order, not unnaturally, opens up numerous possibilities in the modern and postmodern retellings of epics — where either the marginalized are focused upon, or there are no margins or centre. Hence, re-engaging with epics has been a favored trope or theme in literature, mainly over the last hundred years. Some such examples are Dharamveer Bharati’s *Andha Yug* (1954) Chitra Banerjee’s Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) M.T. Vasudevan Nair’s *Bhima: Lone Warrior* (1981) Shyam Benegal’s *Kalyug* (1981) and Mani Ratnam’s *Raavan* (2010).

Again the impact of the epics has been profound on the culture of the subcontinent. While the epics evolved with different versions as per the regional variations in the span of long time, they have also influenced historically not only the field of literature but other fields of arts, fine arts, televisions, films and the
social sciences. The scientific dimensions of them are also a project undertaken by many. The pinnacle status of the epic is disseminated at multiple levels where many undertones of suffering and marginalization are seen by many writers and critics. These issues of marginalization became the coordinates of writers to explore multiple perspectives of the epics. As the thesis is based on the two foundational text of India- the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, let me begin with a short introduction to the two epics.

The *Ramayana* is a story attributed to Valmiki and is believed to have been narrated orally for centuries and first sung by Luv and Kush in front of Rama himself. Later, poets, troops and sages sung it and elaborated it. While on the other hand, *The Mahabharata* comprised in itself multiple voices and perspectives of the story. For example, Sanjay narrated the battle of Kurukshetra to Dhritarashtra which might have been filtered through Ved Vyasa’s perception before getting the place in epic. As said by Devdutta Pattnaik, an eminent scholar of mythology, in a TV show *Devlok* aired on the Epic channel, the *Mahabharata* is only one aspect of the whole narrative which has reached to human being through Vyasa’s student Vaisampayana. No one really knew everything what Vyasa narrated and Ganesha wrote down. Likewise, many stories and anecdote were added to the epic by new narrators and. Pattnaik in his book *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of The Mahabharata* says,

Vyasa narrated the tale to Ganesha who penned it. Of sixty portions, only one part reached human through Vyasa’s student Vaisampayana. He narrated Vyasa’s tale at the yagna of Janmejaya, the great grandson of the Pandava,
Arjun. This was overheard by Sauti or a bard called Romaharshana, who passed it on his own son Ugrashrava, who narrated it to Shonak and other sages of Naimish forest. (pg. xii)

Further he elaborates it with the help of a table,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who narrated the epic?</th>
<th>Who heard the epic?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vyasa</td>
<td>Ganesh, Jamini, Vaisampayana, Suka</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vaisampayana</td>
<td>Janmejaya, Romaharshana</td>
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<tr>
<td>Romaharshana</td>
<td>Ugrashrava (Sauti)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ugrashrava (Sauti)</td>
<td>Shonak</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suka</td>
<td>Parikshit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Four Birds</td>
<td>Jamini</td>
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Thus *Mahabharata* in itself comprises of multiplicity of voices. Most of those who heard it re-narrated it in the epic itself. So perspectives and position of the narrator interferes in the narration of the story. *The Ramayana* which claims to have been painted in a single narrative voice of Valmiki also hints at multiple voices where, Narada, the self proclaimed biggest devotee of Vishnu narrates this tale to Valmiki, who teaches it to Luv-Kush and they sing it to Rama. This shows that there is never a single or final version in narrative tradition of Indian epics.
The thesis focuses on the rewritings of two epics- the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. These texts are originally believed to have been composed about 2,000 years ago and by the great poet Valmiki and the sage Ved Vyasa respectively. *Mahabharata*’s narrator Ved Vyasa was a family member of the Kuru dynasty. Born of a fisherwoman and Rishi Parashara, he was allowed in the family only to beget the throne its heir. Despite being an important family member and a great sage he did not participate in the battle of Mahabharata but chose it as a medium to educate the coming generation the lessons needed to learn from the epic. Not merely being the story of a royal clan, it is speaks of certain values and ideals that should be followed by mankind. *Shrimad Bhagvat Gita* (The Song Divine), an integral part of the epic is the most revered section also. It has acquired different meanings with different interpreters. Valmiki, the narrator of *Ramayana* was also a poet who was himself a character in the epic and sang the ideals and sacrifices of the clan in a glorifying manner. He talks about a utopian society which was established on the ideals of sacrifice and duty. But these ideals have been challenged by many contemporary authors. In recent times these epics have been subject to various re-workings that primarily question their ‘sacred’ contents.

These epics (the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*) have always posed many unsettling questions that have been interrogated from various perspectives in recent times by scholars and creative writers. These questions are the locus of a number of retellings and reinterpretations of the source text. For example, Arshia Sattar in her book *Lost Loves: Exploring Rama’s Anguish* (2011) investigates whether Valmiki
really intended to depict Rama’s story or was Sita the central character of the
Ramayana, is it Rama’s story or Rama’s sorrow and greatness that is central to the
epic or Sita’s sorrow and sacrifice as the end of the story establishes Sita as the
central figure than Rama? Sattar’s retelling definitely puts to question many of the
haloed assumptions that have been handed down to the recipients of the great epic.
So also the representation of many characters in the Mahabharata like Yudhishthira,
Draupadi or even Duryodhana has been challenged, re-imagined and reshaped by
many modern writers in an attempt to raise certain significant questions that have
somehow been overlooked by successive generations of its readers and audience.

Valmiki’s Ramayana is the narrative of ‘Treta yuga’ which is believed to be
prior to dwapara yug (the age of the Mahabharata). The epic dramatizes the conflict
between good and evil in terms of characters as well as actions. It sets examples
regarding the duties of a king, son, brother etc. Rama, the central character of the
epic is beyond any flaw and exemplary in deeds and duties. Possessing high
standards of morality and duty he has been entitled as “Maryada Purushottam” (the
man who is most ideal and noble follower of rules). All his deeds and sacrifices have
been glorified and considered righteous and exemplary. Even the injustices of Rama
as a husband and father, and his negligence towards his family have been oft quoted
to show it as an act of sacrifice of a king for the establishment of an ideal state. In
the epic Ramayana the qualities like sacrifice and valor accompanied with goodness,
social harmony, love among family, prestige etc have been foregrounded and to
highlight those values many gloomy aspects of the narrative have been overlooked
or glorified. There are certain incidents that signify that many injustices were done in the name of honor and kingship in the epic. The picturesque and ‘smooth’ functioning of society cost characters many hardships which early writers chose to ignore and many of the characters do not get the opportunity to speak their perspective and story. “Ramarajya” which was a symbol of an ideal social order where the king might be supreme but he was also to abide by the law of the land and social harmony was said to be prevailing among all human beings as well as animals and welfare of the subjects was the supreme goal of state, have also come under fire. The concept of “Ramarajya” was of a utopian society where justice, peace and harmony were the supreme objective. But for the sake of reverence and morality, many tyrannies of the state were overlooked and this eventually resulted in so many suppressed voices in the glory of Ramrajya. In the garb of these notions, many budding non-conformist voices of protest were suppressed as it opposed the harmony and flavor of the text. The mainstream authors (like Valmiki or Tulsidas etc…) of Rama’s story do not give adequate voice and space to the characters who are considered victims in the epic to express their feelings and protest. The epic focuses on the glorification of Rama and his way of rule rather than other characters as well as their perspectives of Rama and “Ramarajya”. When one goes through Valmiki’s narrative one encounters many issues that left unsettled in the epic. For instance- Sita’s banishment or her sacrifice was rather glorified (but Valmiki’s intention in this regard is a question of deliberation) than condemned in the name of justice, “Rajdharma” and “Stridharma”. Mutilation of Surpanakha is justified and Dasaratha’s exchange of his daughter Shanta for a son and an heir is not at all
questioned. These are certain examples that show how the notion of the Ramarajya was not inclusive but operated on the principles of exclusion. But here is an intervention, if Valmiki did not intend to condemn such incidents and his mere goal was the glorification of Ayodhya or Rama’s empire, why did he even introduce the character of Shanta or present Sita’s ordeal? Did he implicitly intend something and was bound to narrate a different story as the time in which the narrative was composed did not allow to address such issues? Does this ask for an interpretation where gaps and silences should be analyzed rather than written words?

The Mahabharata, on the other hand, is an epic where voices of dissent are more explicit and the characters which have undergone much such subjugation have many times stood against their suppression and marginalization. Although characters like Karna and Draupadi have shown signs of resistance to their humiliation and subjugation and have risen their voice against their victimization yet these voices do get submerged in the metanarrative of the establishment of dharma in not only Vyasa’s version of the tale but also other such versions across the country. But there was obviously a difference between the two epics on the ground that the Mahabharata’s narrator was to an extent not oblivious to the distresses and restlessness prevailing among characters in the name of glorification of the Kuru dynasty unlike that of the Ramayana which somehow could suppress and conceal the dissenting and humiliating voices in the name of honour. The Ramayana is a celebration of the clan of Raghuvansh (especially Rama) from Valmiki’s perspective. However the Mahabharata contains within itself manifold narratives
like Sanjay’s or Vaisampayana’s about the battle of Kurukshetra. It has different narrators within the frame of narrative as presented in the table on page 42.

Now the question that demands to be answered is that why is rewriting of such age old epics needed in contemporary times. Is it, in a way, trying to look for contemporariness of the epics and trying to figure out or identify many issues and problems existing around in today’s world and show how those problems are linked with our mythical past? Or by narrating or placing the age old story in contemporary setting, is it demonstrating the relevance of morals or incidents of the epic? Is it an attempt to reinstate the primacy of those texts in the present world or to show how the contemporary problems have their roots in the past? What is the relevance/purpose of rewriting in contemporary times? Has the style of rewritings changed over the period of time as the reader’s ideas has undergone subtle change? Or two rewritings written in same age and based on same source text might differ in their approach and objective and what might be the reason behind this difference? And the most important, what is the politics behind this idea of rewriting?

Mythology is an integral component in the psychology and social fabric of a community and frames the cultural beliefs and system of that community. M. H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines mythology as-

A system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for
social customs and observances, and to establish the sanction for the rules by which people (or specifically a community conduct their lives. (179)

Mythological stories like The Ramayana and The Mahabharata are revered and considered infallible. They hold a significant status in human culture and claim to establish universal truth. In this garb of establishing ethical codes and structures, mythological norms at times appear repressing and dictating towards certain sections of the society. Conformity to certain social constructs is practiced in the name of reverence and so it becomes a weapon of repression. Mythology thus serves as an ideological weapon to propagate certain beliefs to be followed by the society in the name of custom and rituals. But these stories encompassing such custom and rituals become the focal point of investigation to expose or highlight their repression and negative connotation of certain section of society. So writers in successive ages have tried to locate many untold or lost stories as well as modified the present version suited to their purpose to expose the covert intentions of these narratives. Mythology, as described by M. H. Abrams, is narrated to advocate the validity of a particular social order which is to be followed by a particular community to provide them a sense of belonging as well as commonness. Two grand narratives, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, also have served this purpose. But both of them hold in themselves many problems and voices of unrest in the name of glorification and reverence and writers in later phase have tried to locate these voices through rewriting by contesting the ideological thrust of mainstream rendition.
Demythologization, a term adopted by Rudolf Butmann, becomes significant in this context as it elaborates how the covert implication of a myth can be explored to uncover new meanings. Soumya Mohan Ghosh and Rajni Singh in their essay “Demythologizing Draupadī: A Comparative Study of Saoli Mitra’s Nāthavat anāthavat (“Five Lords, Yet None a Protector”) and Teejan Bai’s Draupadī cīrhara” published in the journal *Archiv Orientální*, write: “Demythologization is the means by which the veiled truth of the myth can be recontextualized in the modern world, where Gods and supernatural beings cease to exert any influence on the affairs of modern people.”(511) Further, they write-

Demythologization inevitably involves a deconstruction of the myth in order to understand the inherent deep structure, the socio-cultural aspects which govern the formulation of mythologies. Following the lead of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, deconstruction strives to de-centre the notion of “Being” as presence and dismiss the concept of a permanent centre based on the reference to a transcendental signified, an external point of reference through which the world can be constructed. Derrida’s strategy of approaching a text involves questioning the assumptions and limitations of textual meaning, revealing, in due course, the construction of certain preferences or privileged notions which define the text, and which generate discourse. Dismantling the figurative construction of the notion of structure and the structurality of the very structure, deconstruction seeks to displace
the hierarchical order of the binary oppositions that give primacy to a privileged concept over an inferior or derivative one. (511)

There are number of grounds on which writers establish their rewritings. One of the focal point among them is gender. With the help of many women characters, writers have tried to locate the woman’s voice in the two grand narratives. For example, The *Ramayana* is the story of Rama, Lakshmana, Ravana, Dasaratha as well as Sita, Urmila, Shurpanakha or Kaikeyi etc. But the epic does not provide adequate space for the women characters to establish them as equal counterparts to the male characters. They are exiled (like Sita), lulled to long sleep (like Urmila) or vilified (like Shurpanakha or Kaikeyi) but do not hold the central position in the epic. All the valor or wisdom has been most of the times credited to the male characters in the narrative. Rama’s capability to pick Hara, Shiva’s bow, and marry Sita has been glorified but at the same time, Sita has not been provided sufficient chance to exhibit her capacity even if she is the first one to pick it. She is projected as a meek and submissive woman and epitomes of virtue and sacrifice in most of the traditional renditions. Her deeds and sacrifices continue to be celebrated as a standard example to be followed by women of future generations for preserving of womanly virtues. Likewise Urmila, Sita’s sister is lulled for a long sleep of fourteen years till her husband returns. Characters like Shurpanakha and Kaikeyi are always presented in negative light without being given chance to express their voice. Even popular folk stories continue to portray similar images of the women characters in the *Ramayana*. Only Ayodhya and ‘Ramrajya’ are celebrated as epitome of
perfection. This sort of characterization has become the focal point of concern for modern writers in India. Characters like Rama and Lakshmana who were beyond enquiry and are revered as epitome of perfection have been subject to critical scrutiny by contemporary writers who rewrite and reinterpret the traditional renderings of the epic from perspectives that had remained veiled to generations of its audience.

In the Mahabharata, another foundational text of Indian culture, unlike the Ramayana, the characters are moreover painted in multiple shades comprising both the qualities of good and evil and thus more lifelike. Even Krishna, who is believed to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, also has multiple shades in his character. So unlike Rama who is Maryada Purushottam, he is Leela Purushottam. The epic which is believed to have been written around 2,000 years ago does not project any ideal state but establishes new meanings of duty and Dharma which can be changed over time. But the characters in the epic themselves fail to understand this and bring doom to a clan. The events in the epic suggest many paths not to be followed by future generations. Both the text (The Ramayana and The Mahabharata) sharply contrast in terms of depicting personal relations, love, sacrifice, defining the role of a man and woman in society and governance. The Mahabharata is an epic where personal interest supersedes the subject’s needs. It is thus not an exemplary text to be followed in popular conscience but speaks of certain innate human flaws which can be lethal for humankind. So it is more a proscriptive rather than a prescriptive text.
As the chapter is based on the phenomena of rewriting specifically in context of Indian mythology, this should be specified that rewriting is an old practice though the manner in which it has been practiced in contemporary times has definitely altered with changing times and social discourse. These stories “gain power with retelling”. (Divakaruni, TPOI). There are number of approaches through which the stories of The Ramayana and The Mahabharata have been told. Different writers have different objectives and had to cater to different audiences/viewers/readers and age through their creative output. Thus the story at times have undergone mutation in such a way that now it becomes difficult to differentiate between the original rendition and rewriting. For eg,- Folksongs and orally transmitted stories of Mithila region accuse Rama of injustice and do not consider him as a good husband while the stories, (oral in tradition) prevalent in Awadh or nearby places sing of the glory of Raghu clan and Rama. Tulsidas in Ramacharitmanas hails Rama as the ideal son, brother and king while Chandrabati in her Bengali version has written about Sita’s story. There can be multiple reasons for the different versions or approaches towards the epic including the writer’s personal interest or biases towards a particular character, the age and period when the story gets told/narrated or the target viewers/ readers or audiences. For example, Tulsidas might have composed and utilized his Ramcharitmanas as a unifying force for Hindus during Mughal Empire while Bengal being the centre of Shakti worship, the prevalent societal paradigm might have paved way for the Sita’s story in the form of Sitayana by Chandrabati. Politicians, patriarchs, feminists, Marxists etc have their own Rama suited to their purpose. Thus the approach of the narrator
largely depends on the context in which they write as well as their ideological commitments.

With the arrival of new approaches towards the two epics, new versions of their stories came up. Some of them appropriated the prevailing ideals while some of them have been alleged of promoting many offensive ideals. For eg- A K Ramanujan’s text *Three Hundred Ramayanas* was charged being immoral and obnoxious presented Rama and Sita in bad light and in an ‘objectionable manner’ and at the order of High Court, it was finally taken out from the syllabus of Delhi University. This is just one of the instances among many where mythological writings as well as rewritings have been attacked on multiple grounds.

A particular text can be written with multiple perspectives. With change in social paradigm new writings emerge to give new dimensions to the tale. Many rewritings have brought to the centre characters that are marginalized in the traditional renditions in terms of gender. These feminist rewritings look at the gender discrimination in epics and present alternative narratives. They also look into the lost oral tradition of epics where female characters also had stories of their own and incorporate them in their works. The portrayal of the characters of Sita, Urmila, Kaikeyi, Draupadi, Kunti and Gandhari has altered with the arrival of new discourses. Feminist rewritings look for the voices of the marginalized women characters and bring them from the periphery to the centre or present them in a new color. Sita’s story has manifold interpretations. Some see her courageous in silently bearing injustice and being an epitome of chastity and preserving her virtue. On the
other hand, some rewritings give her a voice and show her not as a silent victim but one who resists patriarchy and atrocities in her own way. She is the self-reliable, accusing, critical Sita who has other identities rather than only being the wife of Rama in such rewritings. Chandrabati’s *Sitayana* initiated a novel concept of rewriting where a novel perspective with a feminist orientation towards epic was celebrated. Oral stories and folktales sang the injustice done towards her even before. Not only that, her valor was also celebrated in the oral tradition in folksongs of Mithila. In contemporary times, many novelists have looked for this covert aspect of her personality in their writings. Writers like K R Srinivasana Iyengar and Shashi Deshpande also have looked for the new aspects and made Sita the focal point of their works. Devdutta Pattnaik’s *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana* (2013) presents a woman, who is abducted by a demon king, humiliated by her husband and doubted by the people, stands firm, self-reliant and smiling and not at all lamenting over her condition. This is the new Sita, the one who has been ignored by early narrators. Not only Sita but the book is an attempt to reframe other women characters of the narrative and seek their presence as well as their space in the narrative. Another of Pattnaik’s book *The Girl Who Chose: A Retelling of Ramayana* (2016) presents Sita as a woman who makes a choice of carving her own destiny as well as providing Rama a chance to show the world his capabilities. He remarks that it is Sita who has made the world to know about Rama’s story and that might be the reason why Valmiki also called *Ramayana* as *Sita Charitam*. Another writer Samhita Arni in her work *The Missing Queen* (2013) enquires about the whereabouts of Sita after being sent to exile through an unnamed journalist. The
hunt for Sita unfolds many mysteries regarding Ayodhya and Lanka, and Sita’s disappearance. In the novel, Sita does not speak or ask any questions. All her questions are put forth by an unnamed journalist who raises Sita’s voice on her behalf. She is a representative of all the writers who have raised Sita’s questions along with other woman characters like Kaikeyi and Shoorpanakha and their misrepresentation. Another text (graphic novel) by Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar, Sita’s Ramayana, presents a different approach towards Sita where she laments in Dandaka forest but also exposes the drawbacks of patriarchy which argues for strict adherence to rules and overlooks human emotion. The text remarks how patriarchy which is the mainframe of society creates an imbalance in society in terms of emotions. Another notable novel based on Sita,s character is Vayu Naidu’s Sita’s Ascent (2012). In this work the life and plight of Sita is narrated through multiple perspectives of other characters of Ramayana. In this work, Urmila appears to be more rebellious and outspoken than Sita. More than that, womanhood is celebrated through this text.

The Mahabharata offers a range of strong headed women right from Matsyagandha to Draupadi. Draupadi, who is also revered as one of the Panch-Satis is popular as a controversial figure and is not regarded as an ideal role model in traditional patriarchal society. She represents a class of women who questioned the norms and hit back when she could not conform to it. She could speak against men and also avenge her insult. Writers, playwrights and artists in contemporary rewritings have tried to seek ways through which her character could be justified as
well as she could avenge her insults. Pratibha Ray’s *Yagnaseni* (1984) is a novel that presents a Draupadi who is pampered, obedient, wise and not rebellious. She accepts her insult in ‘cheerharan’ after the game of dice and never actually retaliates or tries to avenge her insult but blames herself for all the consequences Pandavas face. Rather, she considers serving them her duty. She is not the strong-headed Draupadi unlike Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Panchali* of *A Palace of Illusions* (2008). Divakaruni presents her as an ambitious and strong woman. She is the narrator of the *Mahabharata* and presents her version of the story. She challenges patriarchal norms every now and then and claims for equal right like her twin brother Drishtadyumna.

The novel, speculative in style, presents her as a free spirited and self-reliant woman who when insulted knows how to avenge. *Mahabharati* (2013), a novel by Chitra Chaturvedi, also has Draupadi at its centre. She is presented as the one who sets the future of Bharata and thus a woman of courage. Manu Sharma, an eminent writer and who has written exhaustively on the characters of the *Mahabharata* has attempted at a fictitious autobiography of Draupadi. In this work, the character speaks out the agony and humiliation she suffers in the system where she speaks against patriarchy and where the women are deliberately harassed in the name of it.

Two other works, *Five Lords yet None a Protector* (2005) by Saoli Mitra and *Sairandhri* (2008) by Narendra Kohli take excerpts from Mahabharata and look into the character of Draupadi. Saoli Mitra’s play presents a hurt and humiliated Draupadi in the court amidst Pandavas, Kauravas and the elders of the Kuru clan. Here Draupadi is not rescued by any Krishna and slams everybody including Krishna with her questions. She is implacable, obdurate and unyielding in the play.
Sairandhri, a novella by Kohli presents the episode when Pandavas along with Draupadi were in incognito and Keechak attempted to molest Draupadi. This novella shows the incapability of the Pandavas, especially Yudhishtira as well as the ferociousness and determination of Draupadi and how cunningly she avenges her dishonor by provoking Bhima to kill Keechak. Thus Draupadi displays a woman who avenges her humiliation with violence, a trait uncommon for a woman.

Apart from these major women characters of the two major grand narratives of Indian tradition, there are other characters as well who have been at the centre of many new renditions. In the Ramayana it is Shantah, Kaikeyi, Ahalya, Shoorpanakha and Mandodari while in the Mahabharata it is Satyawati (Matsyagandha), Gandhari, Kunti, Madhavi or Shakuntala whose portrayal in new renditions present new shades of their characters. Narendra Kohli has written exhaustively on the women characters of the Mahabharata. In Matsyagandha (2011), he has presented the story of Satyawati whose demands eventually altered the course of the epic. Saoli Mitra in a play based on Satyawati also foregrounds the willpower and strength of her and presents her as a courageous woman. Another text by Kohli Kunti (2011) represents Kunti as a woman who despite being a meek and helpless character initially emerges as the strongest mother in the epic. Kunti, again, is a prominent character in Shivaji Sawant’s Mrityunjaya: The Death Conqueror (1989) where her dedication and courage is foregrounded but she is also victimized as a mother as she abandons Karna. Gandhari in Manu Sharma’s text named Gandhari’s Autobiography, or Gandhari ki Aatmakatha (2004) narrates the story of
Gandhari who was married forcibly to a blind man and how she avenges this injustice and the plight she suffers. Kaikeyi or Shoorpanakha who are presented as examples of greed, treachery and infidelity have been given opportunity to justify their deeds and also present their version of the story. Kaikeyi in Samhita Arni’s *The Missing Queen* is a critic of Ramrajya not because Bharat is not the king but because Sita or any other women do not have a place or opinion in the making of the Ramrajya. Shoorpanakha’s plight is also described and how she is treated by the army of Rama for a demand which is not considered sin in her culture. The book strongly argues against the notion of patriarchy. Kane’s *Sita’s Sister* (2014) also cites a strong and humane reason for the reversal of Kaikeyi’s attitude towards Rama. She is not the villainous woman but also a victim of circumstances. Poile Sengupta in her play *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* (2014) shows how Shoorpanakha was ridiculed by two brothers, who were embodiment of God, and she presents her as an innocent victim of patriarchy. These versions allow them to gain sympathy from the reader/viewer or also present the changing social discourse whereas, Shantah, Ahalya, Satyawati, Gandhari, Kunti, Madhavi or Shakuntala emerge on their own and the world comes to know about them and their stories through new versions.

Apart from novels, the television industry has also gained popularity by telecasting mythological renditions. Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayana* (1987) created fervor and turned out to be a shutter-down show. Television became a place of reverence. This show brought the *Ramayana* closer to public where everybody,
literate or illiterate, had an access to the life of Rama. The *Mahabharata* (1988) which was aired on Doordarshan was received with equal passion and created a similar magic. After that, many *Ramayanas* and *Mahabharatas* started getting aired on different channels and later on Sagar production itself made another *Ramayana* with new actors. Later on, Swastik Pictures made a new *Mahabharata* which looked for new perspectives (for eg- Draupadi’s voice, Kunti’s agony, Gandhari’s perspective or Karna’s or Eklavya’s suffering etc). Recently, Star Plus has started telecasting *Siya Ke Ram* (2016), the story of Rama from Sita’s perspective. Even the TV shows, especially family dramas nowadays, if not directly based on mythology, are not completely detached from it. The main protagonist who is usually a virtuous(?) woman suffers from this Sita syndrome while the villainous woman represents Kaikeyi or Manthara, the eternal conspirator and power driven women, or Shurpananakha, the desperate woman ready to snatch anybody’s husband. The stereotyped projection has worked for the TV industry for a long time and continues to do so.

Urmila is another unsung character from the *Ramayana* whose story is not presented by Valmiki in detail. Rather she is lullled to sleep for fourteen years when her husband is in exile. This means that her story was not considered significant enough to be sung by the great poet. Rabindranath Tagore for the first time in his essay on Urmila questions her portrayal as well as ignorance on the part of the writers. As Rama overshadows Sita’s character, Sita’s character does the same with Urmila. Despite being the real daughter of Janak-the true Janaki, princess of Mithila-
Maithili, or the daughter of Videha-Vaidehi, she does not get the place she deserves. Popular renditions of *Ramayana* too do not provide her the space though few writings do portray her as a woman who is dutiful and dedicated her life for her husband. Preserving the chastity and unquestioned dedication towards wifely duties is the recurrent theme in her portrayal. As it has been said that her character did not get due recognition and portrayal by mainstream writers, they are also been criticized by contemporary writers for her In some of the contemporary rewritings, Urmila along with other marginalized characters come out of the closed world of patriarchal values. Maithili Sharan Gupta in *Saaket* beautifully renders the sorrow of Urmila and her separation. She is the central character of this poem and asks several questions. So the sleeping, overshadowed Urmila comes alive in this work. Vayu Naidu in his first novel *Sita’s Ascent* also presents Urmila courageous enough to cross the boundary of her palace as well as Ayodhya to assist Sita in her pregnancy when she is exiled. But the most seminal work on Urmila, *Sita’s Sister* by Kavita Kane alters all her previous portrayal and presents her in a new role. She is the learned, wise, critical and strong headed princess of Mithila who takes care of her, her sisters as well as her household duties single handedly when there is no assistance from the men of the family and when her husband is in exile. She knows the shastras and has strong hold on subjects related to philosophy and *Dharma*. She also participates in intellectual debates and argues with a conviction uncommon to women. She, thus, comes out of the shell in these rewritings and gains an identity of her own.
These are few examples which illustrate how rewritings based on gender and caste look into the stereotyped presentation of women in the two major grand narratives of India and offers alternate ways to look into the age old narratives. Another important aspect of the rewriting is the representation of transgender characters and their role in the story of Ramayana and Mahabharata. If women were sent to the periphery in the epics and mythology was more of an account of men, then the trans-genders or hermaphrodites were of negligible importance. A person with no gender had almost no significant role in popular versions. Devdutta Pattnaik again in one his works on this category of gender Amba and Other Stories They do not Tell You (2015) presents many short stories on them and highlights many such characters and their role in the making of the epics as well as mythology. In Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata, he also gives an account of a lesbian relation between two women which eventually resulted in the birth of Bhagirath, the one who brought Ganga on earth. These are few illustrations which show that how by changing the master centre of the narrative from a male to female or androgynous the story changes and new versions come up.

Many rewritings look for the contemporariness of epics and try to draw parallels to see how epics provide answers to problems posed by the contemporary situations. For example, Shashi Tharoor’s The Great Indian Novel (1989) draws a parallel between the plot of the Mahabharata and contemporary Indian political scenario during struggle for independence, post-independence and during the Emergency where Bhishma from Mahabharata becomes Gangaji, Duryodhana.
becomes Priya Duryodhini and Hastinapur becomes Marabar. *Rajneeti* (2010) a film by Prakash Jha is also an adaptation of the *Mahabharata*. In this film, the quest for political power and fight between cousins to achieve high political position and bloodshed draws a parallel between the epic and the film. Likewise, to show the plight of women even in contemporary times, as well as to show how the story of Sita is still pulsating in the Indian society and women are still victimized, *Lajja* (2001) a film by Rajkumar Santoshi presents the story of four women placed in different situations, time and space. From America to a village in India, women in the film (all bearing the name of Sita) face similar threats and violence and are victims of male chauvinism. These films are examples of adaptations, an aspect of rewriting where characters, at times, are detangled of their origin and become women with independent identities. *Andha Yug* (1954), a play by Dharmaveer Bharati set on the last day of the battle of *Mahabharata* is also an allegory based on the partition of India and overthrow of humanity and loss of innocent lives for the lust of power and arbitrary decisions. The play also highlights that many people who really deserved to have a chance in decision making (whether it is the *Mahabharata* or Independent India) have been overlooked and denied of their rights, for example- Vidur or Yuyutsu.

Indian epics have a wide range of characters that can be broadly classified into heroes and villains. Both the narratives, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have characters who are epitome of vices and virtues. But with the changing social discourse and inclusion of multiple voices in narrative tradition of epics many
characters that were popularly vilified get a new lease of life. Kaikeyi, Shoorpanakha, Ravana, Duryodhana, Ashwatthama, Shakuni and so on belong to this category. They are denigrated for ages as models of evil and maneuvering. But many contemporary writers have tried to look into the untold aspect of these characters and uncovered new dimensions of them. Not only that, some writers have made these vilified characters central to their renditions. The Ramayana, as it has been already discussed has an apparent dichotomy between good and the bad characters and the character of Kaikeyi, Manthara, Shurpanakha or Ravana are maligned in the narrative. But many writings delve into the positive aspect of their characters with necessary alteration. Aacharya Chatusena’s Vayam Rakshamah (1942), a novel in Hindi and Sanskrit celebrates Ravana as the central character of the novel. New perspectives on Ravana and his rise and fall is presented by the writer in a new light. Another novel Lankeshwara (2014) by Madanmohan Sharma Shahi is has Ravana at the centre of the plot. More than presenting his sins and follies, the novel focuses on the psychological and social aspects of Ravana’s character. His human values, great empire, and religious tolerance are the key virtues highlighted in the novel. In the war, the enmity is not because of Ravana’s deeds but due to the ideological conflict between the two. The book also sees the geographical difference as the reason behind the ideological difference between Rama and Ravana. Another popular work Asura: Tale of the Vanquished (2014) by Anand Neelkantan again presents Ravana’s version of story, Ravanayana. The novel engages with the questions of Ravana. When Ravana comes to narrate his version, he says,
For thousands of years, I have been vilified and my death is celebrated year after year in every corner of India. Why? Was it because I challenged the Gods for the sake of my daughter? Was it because I freed a race from the yoke of caste-based Deva rule? You have heard the victor’s tale, the Ramayana. Nowhere the Ravanayana, for I am Ravana, the Asura, and my story is tale of the vanquished. (cover page)

Kaikeyi, projected as the ultimate conspirator for Rama’s exile and his problems, is another character from the epic who is justified in modern renditions and emerges as the savior of Rama and Raghuvansh. Kavita Kane’s Sita’s Sister which is about Urmila, also presents this positive side of Kaikeyi. Samhita Arni’s novel The Missing Queen also presents the character of Kaikeyi which has already been discussed in the chapter. Shoorpanakha, has been portrayed as a victim of patriarchal norms, in many contemporary rewritings. Kavita Kane’s latest release The Princess of Lanka (2016) is a bildungsroman based on the character of Shoorpanakha. Her real name is said to be Minakshi, (an unknown fact for most of the readers). The story does not project her demonic qualities straightaway but cites multiple reasons that led to the making of Shoorpanakha. It traces the life journey of an innocent girl from birth to her doom. She is sharply contrasted with Sita in the novel but not presented merely as a demon but a victim of circumstances like Sita. Poile Sengupta’s play presents her version and her innocence. She belongs to an alien culture where patriarchy does not demand a woman to be silent and can ask a man to marry her. But for Rama and Lakshman, it was an immoral act. And she was
‘rightly’ punished for that. This attitude towards her has been questioned by Sengupta. The text also presents Shakuni, another great conspirator as a victim of power and one who decides to avenge Kuru clan as her sister was forcibly made to marry a blind man by Bhishma. *Gandhari’s Autobiography* also presents this aspect of his character. *Mrityunjaya: The Death Conqueror* by Shivaji Sawant is novel that shows the softer side of Duryodhana as well as Ashwatthama. They are presented as much loyal, kind and large hearted in comparison to the popular image of their characters. There are many other such writings that have explored the positive aspect of these characters.

Some rewritings also try to look for connection between women and nature. Sita and Draupadi spend a fair part of their lives in the forest. Sita is the daughter of the earth while Draupadi is born from fire (different components of nature). Devdutta Pattnaik’s *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana* is a major text which explores the relation between woman and nature. The book says that woman is the preserver of nature while culture is the product of patriarchy. Patriarchy obstructs the growth of the feminine and nature and Sita finds solace in nature. She becomes strong and independent in nature while culture subjugates and overrules her free will. Not only Sita but Shoorpanakha and Shantah are also victim of this patriarchal culture. *Sita’s Ramayana* by Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar is also a work which presents helpless and abandoned Sita asking for shelter and solace from nature. And nature helps her and shows empathetic attitude towards her which is absent in culture and patriarchy. Draupadi on the other hand has suffered the worst
humiliation and is a victim of patriarchy, culture and Dharma. But she, unlike Sita, does not stay back in nature but comes to the cultural domain to avenge her humiliation. Period of exile in a forest for Draupadi, is a time to restore her energy. Thus nature for her is an energizing force. Thus these rewritings look for the contemporary ecological issues in Indian mythology and we definitely find undertones of ecofeminism in these contemporary renditions of the classical epics.

Another theme/issue which contemporary writers investigate in mythology is to look for the characters which are marginalized in terms of caste and race. Shambhuka and Sumitra in the Ramayana and Karna and Eklavya in the Mahabhrata belong to this group of characters. Shambhuka’s story which is presented to ensure Rama’s just and dutiful act as a king is questioned by many contemporary thinkers and writers and considered as a blot in the name of justice. It is also one of the earliest story of caste discrimination. Devdutta Pattnaik’s Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana tells about Ram-Shambhuka episode whereas Uma Chakravarthy in her book Gendering Caste Through A Feminist Lens (2003) narrates briefly the story of Shambhuka and its meaning. Daya Pawar in his poem “O Great Sage” comments on the issue of caste discrimination by emphasizing Ekalavya’s question in this poem. Sumitra, on the other hand, is a royal queen. Interestingly, she is not seen as a victim of caste discrimination among masses but Pattnaik in his retelling of The Ramayana has expressed how she and her sons were strategically marginalized without even realizing and both were never contenders to the throne and cites several reasons for it, Sumitra being a charioteer’s daughter is
one them. Kavita Kane also in her retelling *Sita’s Sister* presents her as an inferior queen as she belongs to a ‘low-caste’. Such rewritings unfold many hidden implications as well as issues in a text which popularly go unnoticed. Karna on the other hand at the end of the epic emerges as a hero but consistently humiliated and meted with unfair treatment. Ramdhari Singh ‘Dinkar’ in his narrative poem *Rashmirathi* (1952) makes Karna the hero of his epic and presents beautifully his version of story where all his agony is expressed. This poem presents Karna as the greatest hero in the battle of Mahabharata. Another work, *Mrityunjaya* by Shivaji Sawant frames his character and shows his capability as well as generosity through the perspective of other characters as well. *Karna’s wife: An Outcaste Queen* by Kavita Kane presents Karna’s story from his wife’s perspective and narrates his valor as well as disgrace he comes across. Eklavya, a bheel tribe, from the *Mahabharata* is a victim of caste hierarchy and his ability of archery is hampered because of this. Many works dwell into Eklavya’s question and demand justice on his behalf. Shivshankar Pattnaik’s *Eklavya* (1984) is one of the most intense writing on him which gives a detailed account of his story. Apart from this, *The Offering* (a graphic novel) (2011) by Hansa Pathak is a work which describes the character of Eklavya. Eklavya and his victimization becomes a study in academic favoritism in Shankar Shesh’s play *Ek Aur Dronacharya*. The play suggests that there are many Eklavyas who are victimized not only in terms of caste but also in terms of class.

The above survey of the numerous renditions of the grand narratives of the Indian culture-scape reveals that there has been constant attempt at looking at these
two master texts from various fresh radical perspectives. In the process what gets
discovered is the way by which the contemporary authors engage ideologically with
these age-old revered texts to give them a fresh significance. The forthcoming
chapters shall make detailed study of contemporary rewritings of the Indian epics
with gender and caste as the two coordinates of analysis.