Rewriting, as a category of resistant writing, aims at reinterpreting old canonical texts with new insights where these canonical texts are looked at from fresh perspectives that foregrounds their silences and absences. This is usually done by means of interrogating, challenging and deconstructing the overt significance of these canonical texts. In recent times there has emerged a plethora of rewritings of major canonical works from around the globe from various perspectives such as the postcolonial perspective, feminist perspective, postmodern perspective so on and so forth. In all such works we encounter the subversion of various hierarchies where the ‘master’ center of the canonical narrative is replaced by a ‘minor’ character/event to reveal the power equations of the canonical text. This margin, which had been silent, suddenly acquires voice whether be that of the slave or a woman or a disabled. Of all popular rewritings feminist rewritings have carved a niche of their own by interrogating the literary canon for their prejudiced representations of gender and have offered fresh perspectives to traditional portrayal of the gendered subject. Lisa Tuttle in her Encyclopedia of Feminism (1986) defined feminist theory as asking "new questions of old texts" (6). She cites the goals of feminist criticism as “developing and uncovering a female tradition of writing
interpreting symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view, rediscovering old texts, analyzing women writers and their writings from a female perspective, resisting sexism in literature, and increasing awareness of the sexual politics of language and style. Feminist revisionist mythology tends to fulfill at least one of these goals. Instead of just studying prior works though, it is the revision of old texts to create new ones.”(7)

In her essay “Reading and Writing the Other: Criticism as Felicity”, Martine Motard-Noar quotes Hélène Cixous’ theory as “if you examine literary history, it’s the same story. It all refers back to man, to his torment, his desire to be (at) the origin,”(93). And in their stories the women are always treated as subservient to men, whose stories are not worthy of a place in the canonical literature. She believes that “the logocentric project had always been, undeniably, to found (fund) phallocentrism, to insure for masculine order a rationale equal to history itself?”(93).

It is left up to women to deconstruct male centered texts in order to uncover the phallocentric power structure which subjugates women. This prejudiced presentation was challenged by many 19th and 20th century writers.

Certain works in literature have been established as canon. According to Oxford English Dictionary, the canon is, “A body of literary work traditionally regarded as the most important, significant and worthy of study; those works of esp. Western Literature considered to be established of being the highest quality; and most enduring value, the classics.”(16). Thus canon in a way proposes what everyone should know and how a certain work should be remembered. Most of these
canons are charged of being phallocentric that ensure a social order suitable to the patriarchy. Women’s rewriting at times challenges these canons and is of the view that the existing canons need to be revised. They also challenge the view that the existing canon is worth remembering as such. Its corrective memory-work is part of the critique of authority embedded in the so-called canon wars. Rewritings are, therefore, a kind of resistant writings at times against the established canons.

L. Plate in his book *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women's Rewriting* charges canons of being a phallocentric and writes,

> It is believed that women’s experience is excluded from the ‘great texts’ designated as form of culture’s literary heritage and second-wave women first set out to rewrite them. To recall Adrienne Rich’s notion of revision, “we need to the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break it’s hold over us”. (19)

As this chapter deals with rewritings that have been written from the perspective of gender let us begin with the famous rewritings of some of the Western canonical writings.

*Proserpine* (1874), a drama by Mary Shelley and P. B. Shelley is based on Ovid's tale of the abduction of Proserpine by Pluto, a part of his Greek story “Metamorphoses”. It focuses on the women characters of the narrative and male characters are almost absent in the play. This retelling from Ceres's point of view by Shelley narrates the separation of the mother and the daughter and the strength
offered by a community of women. It also emphasizes how woman’s suffering is a result of male ambitions. The myth is explicitly about male tyranny and exploitation of women but also about women solidarity. Proserpine belongs to female literary tradition which, as feminist literary critic Susan Gubar describes it, has used the story of Ceres and Proserpine to "re-define, to re-affirm and to celebrate female consciousness itself."

Foe (1986), a novel by the South African writer and Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee is a rewriting of Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe. Foe is written from the perspective of Susan Barton, a castaway who landed on the same island inhabited by "Cruso" and Friday as their adventures were already underway. Like Robinson Crusoe, it is a framed story, unfolded as Barton's narrative while in England attempting to convince the writer Daniel Foe to help transform her tale into popular fiction. Focusing primarily on themes of language and power, the narrative is a feminist intervention in masculine world of Crusoe.

In her collection of short stories, Good Bones (1992), Margaret Atwood in “Gertrude Talks Back” rewrites the famous closet scene in Shakespeare’s Hamlet (1609). The Shakespearean plays especially tragedies are known for its men characters. Women characters have very less to contribute in them. Hamlet is one of the most celebrated of Shakespeare’s tragedies and the closet scene is widely interpreted in terms of Oedipus complex. Hamlet, the central character of the play, proclaims "Frailty, thy name is woman". This speaks the general attitude towards woman and Atwood in her work tries to locate and contest this attitude.
Charolette Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) is one of the most celebrated and critically acclaimed novels of English literature. Not only through a postcolonial perspective but also from a feminist standpoint, the novel has been the focus of many critics and authors. Jean Rhys in her work, *Wild Sargasso Sea* (1966) set as prequel to *Jane Eyre* offers a feminist re-reading of the novel highlighting the gender equation of the society where the issue of sexism is intertwined with racism. In this work, Rhys gives a name to the unnamed character and presents her point of view by narrating the suffering she undergoes.

Apart from this, not only major canonical texts but folklores as well as many fairytales have also been revised and the ‘Her’ version of the story gradually becomes central to the narrative. Stories of Cindrella and Snowhite sketches a fictitious world where beauty and submissiveness are keys to happiness for a woman. It puts the fragile mind of children into an artificial make-belief world where there is present an undercurrent of racism as well as sexism. These narratives influence construction of gender in the child’s psyche and dictate certain socially sanctioned conduct as well as the roles women are provided according to their attributes in such stories. Beauty, tenderness, submissiveness and incuriosity are constructed as feminine virtues while chivalry, strength and inquisitiveness are characterized as masculine. Any deviation from the specified social norms is considered unusual and such characters are portrayed in an adverse light. According to an article in *The Guardian*, a daily newspaper, on 11th February 2015, entitled “New Feminist Version of Classic Fairy Tales”, the rewriting of fairy tales
emphasize on equal opportunities rather than wealth, beauty and youth of men and women. The article throws light on the fact that a group of women’s liberation movement on Merseyside is rewriting fairy tales as the group complained that the fairy stories relegate to definite “sex role” and women are not expected to determine their destiny. The prince always decides to marry the princess and she has to comply, happily. They also project marriage as an act of liberation and emancipation for women and redeem her from her troubles. In another article published in The Guardian on July 20, 1981 based on the same theme entitled ‘Once Upon a Time Lines got Crossed’, Mariana Warner writes that marriage winds up everything, and redeem a trodden girl from all her problems. And it is the man, or say, prince who she needs most for her emancipation. She quotes- “… by reading famous fairy tales unaltered and unreconstructed, we are inculcating our sons with misogynist contempt and patriarchal collusion.”(9)

These examples show how canonical writings as well as popular fairytales that have been celebrated for very long has an undercurrent of sexism and how writers by foregrounding the ideological marginalization of female characters try to curb this either by foregrounding or creating in the narrative women characters and making them central or by changing the narrative structure of the story and assigning new roles to the female characters (like fairytales). This is eventually considered as an act of emancipation and resistance.

After discussing a few Western feminist rewritings and how it dismantles gender stereotypes in literature, let us discuss how Indian mythological writings and
rewritings have been engaged with the question of gender and its role. Nabaneeta Deb Sen in an article “When Women Retell the Ramayana” published in Manushi says,

Epic poets the world over are men singing the glory of other men—armed men, to be precise. In a study I did a couple of years ago, I noticed that out of the thirty eight basic things upon which most epic narratives of the world are based, only nine are associated with women. The ideals of the epic world obviously do not have much to share with women, nor do the women enjoy the heroic values. There is little they can do there—other than get abducted or rescued, or pawned, or molested, or humiliated in some way or other.’

(18)

In an attempt to idealize women, many mythological characters are popularized as exemplary. Religion being an important medium to idealize and instruct, it is easier to make it a tool of instruction and role of patriarchy cannot be overlooked in this regard. For instance, Sita, the female lead in Ramayana, in popular and traditional social/religious beliefs is presented and admired as an epitome of purity, fidelity, sacrifice and womanly virtues. She is classified as a defining figure of Indian womanhood which is essentially to be followed by women to be labeled as ‘virtuous’. She is a dutiful daughter, a faithful wife, an upright daughter-in-law and a courageous and devoted mother. Moreover, her character is celebrated as a silent bearer of injustice in the name of rules and culture. This image of a woman is acknowledged as an ideal woman in Indian society. In contrast to this,
another woman in the epic, Shurpanakha, is denigrated as a devil and a character who should not be emulated because she is dangerous to the moral code sanctioned by the mainstream society. She is projected as a foil to Sita who seeks revenge, initiates herself for marriage and is not bound to any culture. These two extremes offer the ‘to be or not to be’ version of Indian womanhood. The image of “Sati-Savitri” or “Sati Anusaiya” still holds a strong grip on women and husbands are worshipped and can only be protected by the power of sacrifice and virtue of their wives. Further in same article Sen writes,

The impact is far-reaching. Several years ago, Sally Sutherland showed that for 90 per cent of the Indians she interviewed, Sita was their favourite (mythical) woman. No one blesses a bride by saying, “Be like Draupadi”. It is always Sita and Savitri. They are the saviours. Savitri saved her husband from death, Sita saved him from disgrace. Although Sita’s life can hardly be called a happy one, she remains the ideal woman through whom the patriarchal values may be spread far and wide and through whom women may be taught to bear all injustice silently.” (24)

Interestingly, even present day TV shows where the chief protagonist is mainly a woman also presents the same binary where one woman who is an epitome of value, loyalty and sacrifice is tricked by another woman who is lustful, clever and seeks revenge. The good woman is thus an image of Sita while the bad woman is Shurpanakha. Popular social outlook is still haunted with such binaries. Needless to
say, Indian feminists still have a long way to dismantle this stereotyped projection of women and their roles.

Another epic, the *Mahabharata*, on the other hand, displays different categories of women. Out of the long list of women characters, Draupadi is the most discussed character of the epic. She is a strange kind of role model for women, one who should not and should be followed at the same time. Despite being wives to five men, she is designated as Sati, a dutiful wife. Like Sita, she is also born from nature, the fire. But unlike her, she is not welcomed, loved or educated. She is also not resilient against the injustices against her and strongly protests against it. Her outspoken attitude is presented as irksome for ideal woman. Mythology is, thus, replete with women characters who, when they do not conform to the ideal code of conduct specified for women, brought their doom.

Many mythological stories sketch various virtuous women and demonstrate how their loyalty towards their duties and womanly virtues raise their status (they are worshipped as “devis”) and make them a role model for womanhood. These stories sketch women as an ideal daughter, devoted wife or a courageous mother. Independent identity of woman is not encouraged in these narratives. This speaks about the prevalent patriarchal and hegemonic system which bounds a woman to a man. Many mythological characters, which were later on remembered as Sati, had to undergo number of trials to prove themselves as devoted wives or daughters-in-law. Sita, Mandodari, Draupadi, Gandhari are few examples in this regard.
Moreover, women are also categorized as a cause of distraction for many sages and ascetics in mythology. At times, they are also used as instruments of lust to excite and cause disruption in the rituals (Menaka, Urvashi etc.) The concept of celibacy has different parameters as well as social acceptance for men and women. The intelligence of women is also considered subservient to men. Gargi, a lady ascetic attended the conference where Yagnavalkya, a sage challenged other learned people in a competition to decide the most intelligent sage of the land. The questions of Gargi perturbed and angered the sages so much that they asked her to stop asking more questions or her head would fall off. But Gargi persisted, undeterred. The postscript of the Gargi script, as told by Uma Chakravarti in her book, Gendering Caste: Through A Feminist Lens (2003) writes that she became satisfied with the answers Yagnavalkya gave to her and accepted him as the greatest philosopher of his time. Chakravarthy says,

The dalit feminist writer Kumud Pawade believes that it was Gargi’s rebellious questions that led to the exclusion of all women, including brahmana women, from sharing sacred knowledge with their men. Ultimately, their own questions were submerged under the ideology of men.

(20)

The present chapter tries to study some of the significant women characters who are presented from a fresh perspective in the rewritings and given a central position which have been denied in the mainstream rendition. These ‘misrepresented’ characters assume different meanings in their reincarnated forms in
the rewritings. The chapter also tries to look into the ways by which contemporary writers have reinvented these women characters so as to expose the ideological moorings of the traditional rendering of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

Beginning with the Ramayana, the two major characters that are chosen to be studied in the light of gender discrimination are Sita and Urmila. In the light of the glorification of sacrifice and dedication towards wifely duties, these two characters are not presented in their capacity in the mainstream rendition or, do not have an equal status with that of their male counterparts in popular imagination. Especially Urmila’s character is not even provided enough space compared to Lakshmana or even Sita and she has been lulled to a long sleep of fourteen years. This slumber is a symbol of the silence and ignorance on the part of the mainstream writers and how the popular mythological texts do not put to the centre women characters and present them in the light of male characters.

Sita, the daughter of earth, brought up by a king, married to a prince and mother of two sons has been one of the most tragic figures of womanhood. She is popularly revered as devi and posited as a role model for women in India. But the Ramayana does not give sufficient space to her voice. Meghnad Desai in article “Sita and some other Women from the Epic” published in In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology edited by Namita Gokhale and Malashri Lal says,

As a wife and indeed as a character in the Ramayana, Sita is strangely absent. Valmiki allows her a very little space… In total, Sita appears in
seventy-six sargas out of 645 accounting for barely 10 percent of the *Valmiki Ramayana*. Even her beauty is not described in her presence but in Rama’s lamentations after her abduction. (4)

In Valmiki’s narrative, her sorrowful side is of greater significance than her valor and pride. He seems to be more charmed by the men in the story—either of Raghu clan or even Ravana family. Paula Richman, an eminent scholar of the *Ramayana* tradition, in her book *Questioning Ramayanas* comments, “Seldom in Valmiki’s telling do we hear Sita’s voice without the mediation of males who surround and protect her.”(15) Does it mean that Sita’s role is not of equal caliber compared to Rama in the epic or does he intentionally overlook the character of Sita? Is the character herself silent or silenced by the author? Or had Sita’s character the potential to create a stir in the patriarchal social order which would have created a disharmony and thus has not been given proper space? Not only Valmiki but even Khamban and Tulsidas, who composed their version much later, have also not given voice or space to her character. Both of them have glorified the character of Rama and thrown Sita to the margins. Even if Sita is barely presented, she is only limited as a woman displaying her feminine virtue and discusses her either as Rama’s wife or a uni-dimensional character not much to offer. Famous theatrical performances, bedtime stories or folktales present Rama as a domineering presence and his lineage is well adorned and presented. There are instances which present Sita’s version too (for eg- folksongs in Mithila or Andhra Pradesh) but they fail to affect the mass or do not find a place in popular imagination. Is it an ideological suppression that is a
part of women’s marginalization, making it an intentional political motive? Why is her story not revered equally (in terms of valor and ideals like Rama) and does not cover major part of the epic? Where is Sita in all the grand display of valor? When was she born? Who was her mother? Why is she strangely absent or silent in the mainstream renditions? These are recurrent questions that successive tellers have chosen to ignore. Many contemporary writers have pondered over these questions and presented alternative versions offering Sita’s story from different perspectives. Paula Richman, a scholar of the *Ramayana* in her book, *Questioning Ramayana: A South Asian Tradition*, analyses the character of Sita in the light of her confrontation with Ravana and finds that Sita defends herself by upholding the patriarchal notion that her sexuality belongs to her husband alone. Richman, again points out-

After Ravana leaves, however, Sita despairs as Rama has not yet rescued her, she comes to realize how wretched her dependence upon men is, thereby, opening up a small crack in the ideological structure of Valmiki’s narrative. Sutherland Goldman suggests that Sita’s interaction with Ravana and their aftermaths awaken Sita to the terrors of female dependence upon men’s power. (17)

Sita is a character of immense capability and strength. In the narrative, she is idealized as a faithful female counterpart of a generous man. But there are few instances that display her might. She was the first one to pick Hara, Shiva’s bow, single-handedly. She accompanied Ram in his fourteen years old long exile without any luxury and lived in Ravana’s territory all alone. Then what makes her a figure of
weakness, oppressed and devoid of any dissent? Why is she popularly imagined as a figure of submissiveness and victimized in the name of tradition? Or is Valmiki’s portrayal the only faithful rendition of the character? Or does Valmiki’s intentions were not interpreted as he wished to present her character. Devdutta Pattnaik in his work *The Girl Who Chose: A new way of narrating the Ramayana* writes,

In the dim of Ravana’s cruelty and Rama’s valour something is often overlooked- the story of Sita, the girl who chose…-she makes five choices. And had Sita not made these five choices, the story of Rama would have been very different indeed. That is why Valmiki sometimes refers to the *Ramayana* as Sita Charitam, the story of Sita.(3)

Along with the tradition of reverence and faith, a parallel tradition of questioning and dissent has also existed. For example, the *Ramayana* might be a text depicting the life and courage of Rama but the folktales and folksongs of Mithila do not give reverence to Rama and rather accuse him of injustice towards Sita and celebrate her as figure of strength. Many rewritings celebrate Sita’s character in the light of the qualities that are ignored by previous writings. Not only Sita but the characters of Urmila, Tara, Shantah, Kaikeyi or even Mandodari are painted with new imagination and new version.

The characters of Sita and Urmila from the *Ramayana* are discussed in the present chapter to see how different rewritings have provided different insights to these characters either by locating their voices or providing them one.
Sita

Sita is, no doubt, idealized as the biggest icon for Indian women. Her dedication, her sacrifice and her chastity has provided a role model for women for very long. The role of television cannot be overlooked in shaping her image among the population. Ramanand Sagar’s teleserial *Ramayana* was one of the early blockbuster on Indian television. Its impact was steadfast on common mass. Like multiple narrative traditions of the text, it had its own way of presenting the character of Rama and Sita. Sita in the show is beautiful, obedient and a dedicated woman. She worships her husband and performs all her wifely duties. She even leaves Ayodhya and Rama and goes to exile all alone only to save her husband from disgrace. The only time she defies her husband is when she is asked to give trial by fire for the second time and descends back to earth. The viewers break down after seeing this plight of Sita. This fills them with a feeling usually of veneration for her. Such multiple factors lead to the stereotyped representation of Sita. Sita thus is personified as an ideal woman, one who ‘should’ be followed. Her obedience, silence and wifely duties are idealized as exemplary.

But there are other aspects to the character of Sita. Devdutta Pattnaik in his work *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana* makes Sita the chief protagonist of his story. Sita in this work is very different from her portrayal in the mainstream imagination. Like the *Ramayana*, this work is also divided into seven parts, each celebrating the life and deeds of Sita and singing her story to the world. The book is an attempt to relocate many silent, hidden and suppressed voices in Valmiki’s
epochal narrative. The book begins with Sita’s birth and ends with her descent. Sita is juxtaposed with Shantah, the forgotten daughter of Dasaratha in the initial chapters and with Shurpanakha in later chapters. Shantah is the unwanted daughter of Dasaratha who is bargained for getting sons in return whereas Sita is the adopted daughter of Janaka who enjoys all the privileges of a real princess. Shantah is a princess who is abandoned while Sita is an orphan who is accepted. In later phase Shurpanakha, who does not belong to civilized and cultured world is projected in contrast with Sita. Sita embodies patience and compassion while Shurpanakha represents ambition combined with impatience and revenge. Thus Sita in this work is represented in the light of these two characters.

Another graphic novel *Sita’s Ramayana* by Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar is in the first person narrative by Sita after Rama abandons her. She, in the work, tries to find solace and support in nature that does not judge her in cultural (patriarchal) terms. Thus, she is complemented and consoled by nature. Here she speaks against the norms of culture which is set by patriarchy and finds nature more sensitive towards women. She finds herself heard and understood more in nature and amidst wildlife. She not only laments at her own condition but also speaks for other women in the story and argues how patriarchy has overlooked and thrashed the emotion and needs of women in the name of culture.

*The Missing Queen* by Samhita Arni is another novel where the injustice meted out to Sita has been questioned and the state of Ayodhya is challenged for its totalitarian regime. Interestingly, here Sita does not ask her questions directly but
her questions are asked through an unnamed journalist who might represent many contemporary writers engaged with Sita’s version of the story. Not only her plight and injustices are questioned but the atrocities done in the name of Ramrajya are also focused by the writer.

As these three novels are taken to illustrate the character of Sita, they present Sita in different shades. She is not merely the self sacrificing, lamenting woman but a courageous and inquisitive one in her new portrayal. And above all, her presence is marked. Pattnaik in his book presents the story of Sita’s birth, childhood and her education. Contrary to the popular belief that says that Janak, out of compassion and being childless accepted an orphan girl, Pattnaik provides Sita the choice to accept Janak as the father and to be called as Janaki, Maithili (princess of Mithila), Vaidehi (Videha’s daughter) etc. Education of Rama and his brothers is an integral part of the Ramayana, but Sita’s education is not discussed. This text presents Sita as a disciple of Gargi, one of the most intelligent and inquisitive seer of her times. The book further makes a comparison between Dasaratha, who barters his daughter Shantah (in popular belief Dasharatha had only 4 sons and no daughter of his is mentioned, indicating the ignorance of presence of women in society) in exchange of sons and Janaka, who was contended with daughters. The motive behind this comparison is to show how Mithila and Ayodhya differed in attitude which forms the background of Sita’s life, her attitude as well as her misfortunes in future while the ambience of Mithila, supple and less inclined towards rules gave her ample scope to explore knowledge and gain wisdom. Another notable work by Patnaik
*The Girl who Chose* also discusses this relation between Janak and Janaki and how Janak and the culture of Mithila helped Sita to gain knowledge.

Sita is the balancing force of Rama. Rama is the one who is inclined more towards rules. Sita balances him by inculcating emotions in him. When Rama stops her from accompanying him into exile, she says,

I do not need your permission. I am supposed to accompany you, to the throne, into war and to the forest. What you eat, I shall taste. Where you sleep, I shall rest. You are the shaft of the bow that is our marriage; you need the string to complete it. My place is beside you, nowhere else. Fear not, I will be no burden; I can take care of myself. As long as I am beside you and behind you, you will want for nothing. (82)

She goes to exile with Rama, not as a burden to be carried but as one who would take the responsibility of her as well as the prince of Ayodhya. She is thus presented as a self-reliant woman.

Sita is presented more humane and compassionate in the text. She does not laugh at Shoorpanakha and does not even provoke Rama and Lakshman to hurt her. Rather she is the only one who could foresee the repercussions of the deed. In Pattnaik’s version of her, she after going to exile, meets Shoorpanakha again, who mockingly laments at her and her loneliness. There, she does not speak ill to her rather teaches her the importance of self-reliance and completeness where a woman
does not need a man in life to fulfill her needs. Her compassionate and empathetic nature is not only shown in her attitude towards Shoorpanakha but also towards Tara or Kaikeyi or Shantah. Pattnaik in his book provides a fresh perspective to the epic by narrating it in the light of Sita’s character. The book has been divided into seven chapters and has a prologue and an epilogue narrating the life of Sita like Rama’s in the Ramayana. The first chapter talks about the myth of her birth. Janaka finds her when he was ploughing the land. Popular belief (as presented in the Ramayana or earlier writings) says that she was called Janaki as Janaka chose to become father of an abandoned child by adopting her. But here the book subverts this myth by giving Sita the choice of carving her own destiny. Janaka calls her Janaki because she was the one to “choose Janaka to be her father (10)”.

The book further makes a comparison between Dasaratha, who barters his daughter Shantah (in traditional belief Dasharatha had only 4 sons and no daughter, indicating the ignorance of women in society) in exchange of sons and Janaka, who was contended with daughters. The motive behind this comparison is to show how Mithila and Ayodhya differed in attitude which forms the background of Sita’s life, her attitude as well as her misfortunes in future. Dasaratha’s lust for a son blinds him so much that he not only barters his daughter for satisfying this lust but also marries thrice to make his wish fulfilled and provide Ayodhya the heir to the throne. Loyalty towards the throne and subject always superseded the personal relations and love in Raghu clan.

The book presents that the court of Mithila had a custom of organizing annual debates and discussions on Vedas which were later compiled as Upanishads.
Sita, therefore, gains the first hand knowledge of this intellectual debate and had seen intellectuals like Gargi, Yagnavalkya etc. She realises that mere acceptance of ideals, customs and beliefs is of no good and desire for knowledge is the root of wisdom. Rituals or theories should not be followed blindly but examined and re-examined. The state of Mithila was not in the habit of suppressing ideas in the name of ideals, customs and gender unlike Ayodhya. Pattnaik in the book has taken liberty with the story showing Sita and Urmila present with Rama and Lakshmana after Tadaka’s assassination when Vishwamitra tells them the story of Ganga’s descent on earth and how Shiva captured her in his locks till she submitted to his wishes of shedding her force and replacing it with gentleness. Sita and Urmila do not seem complacent with this argument unlike Rama and Lakshmana and ask, “To be a wife must a woman be tamed as Ganga (52)”. Further they question the sage that if he wants to assert that femininity if not domesticated would lead to imbalance in family as well as societal order. Such attitude of Janaka’s daughters surprises Vishwamitra. Pattnaik remarks, “It did not escape Vishwamitra’s notice that Janaka’s daughters asked questions like Gargi of the Upanishads; Dasharatha’s son preferred obeying commands. Different seeds nurtured in different fields by different farmers produce very different crops indeed.”(41). This portrayal of Sita here is unlike the popular image of a docile and submissive woman who never protests or disagrees with her husband, duty or society. She presents a standard of femininity not considered proper and against her stereotyped projection. Jasbir Jain in her introduction in book Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency says,
Gender is constructed by interplay of both femininity and masculinity. Further the manner in which retellings have altered them is equally relevant, for the change marks either the resistance or a shift in the social perception of the role, or it may also signify a shift of focus because of social location of the narrator/narrators. (29)

Sita was the first one to pick Hara, Shiva’s bow, even before Rama, with just one arm while swabbing the floor with the other. She was equal to Rama in terms of capability and physical strength as she also faces the hardships and dangers of the forest and more than that, she confronts Ravana in his territory without any weapon. Then why does she hold the persona of weakness rather than strength in our psyche? Pattnaik here in his book presents a novel and fresh image of Sita who knows her strength, and does not succumb to repressing social norms. During her first exile with Rama, he refuses to take her to the forest as he is worried about her security while she vehemently rejects Rama’s argument saying she does not need his permission to accompany him as she can take care of herself. But the text also hints that wifely duty was not the only reason for Sita to accompany Rama but she actually maintains equilibrium between rules, vows, and practical world and emotions by providing the brothers an emotional balance. After spending a long period of exile, the first biggest danger that comes to Rama, Sita and Lakshmana is in the form of Surpanakha. This encounter for the first time makes Sita scared of the coming dangers. “That was no animal, my husband.” (126) warns Sita. Sita expresses her disagreement on Lakshmana’s act of disfiguring Suparnakha as she could foresee fatal consequences
of the brutality done by dishonoring a woman. The men do not feel the need to pay heed to a woman’s advice and thus suffer. Her independent and uninhibited attitude is sensed by the nature around which she lives. The book narrates that when Rama was looking for her after her abduction and asking every living being, be it nature or animal, about her whereabouts, the rocks reply that she might have “created distraction by herself so that she could run away tired of living like an exile in the forest.” (158) and when Rama begins to cry and his tears falls on the grass, the grass speaks,

‘Does the prince weep for his wife or for himself?’

‘Is there a difference? The pain of incompleteness is as much hers as it is mine. I am nothing without her and she is nothing without me.’ Rama replied.

‘You presume too much,’ the bushes shouted. ‘Sita does not need you… You need her. She is free. Once you claimed her as yours. Now another claims her as his.’ (278)

After the war, Sita’s ordeal begins when she has to prove her worth as a chaste woman. When she appears before Rama after the rescue from Ravana’s hostage, she does not find her husband but a king for whom she is just a trophy to be displayed as a sign of her victory. For him she becomes a blot on the name of his clan. This particular incident in fact, changes the course of the epic as well as Sita’s relationship to Rama. A new feel of distrust develops which lasts till the end of the
story. Rama the king, supersedes Rama the husband, and Sita becomes the biggest victim of this change. Sita’s absence in Rama’s life disturbs the equilibrium between masculinity and femininity in his life and thus the tenderness is no more to be seen in Rama. This lack of tenderness and emotion in Rama not only makes Sita a victim of his harsh decisions but incidents like Vali’s killing and commanding Tara to go to Sugriva ignoring her choice shows that Rama without Sita could be a heroic man in deeds but becomes more practical in terms of emotions and respect towards others’ choice. Rama’s toughness results in breaking of the bow unlike Sita who used to handle it so easily like a feather without harming it.

Pattnaik divides the work into seven chapters added with a prologue and an epilogue like Valmiki’s Ramayana. He deliberately calls the last chapter- “Freedom”. In this chapter Sita emerges from the shell and secures an identity of her own. Her long suppressed rationality, sense of self sufficiency and pride all are presented in this chapter. Sita in this work emerges as master of her destiny after Rama abandons her on countering widespread gossips and rumors among his subject about her worth as the queen of Ayodhya. Rama as a king wants his queen to be above any suspicion and doubt and pure in reputation. But he never expresses what he, as a husband and as a lover felt about her character. Even he trickily, along with Lakshmana, sends her away from the palace. This also puts to light another predicament of her life that she suffers more because of her reputation as the princess or queen. Her reputation was in question because a queen has to be exemplary in character and deeds. Does this signify that had she not been a queen,
she would not have suffered so much humiliation and agony? Are social or particularly masculine notions of purity, reputation and sacrifice class contingent?

Pattnaik highlights these questions in the book and alongside presents Sita calm, content and relaxed in the lap of nature free of all customs and cultural shackles where neither is she the queen, a representative of the royal class who should be exemplary, nor a woman bound to any man but a human being who can live life on her own terms. Especially the gesture she shows while moving to the forest by unbinding her hair indicates that she is free from all relations and she has done away with all worldly customs. She celebrates her status as a common woman rather than being a queen. Unlike earlier narratives, she does not allow herself to lament at such insults, grief and loss but instead moves to the forest with a serene smile at her face without showing any rage against Rama or Ayodhya. Instead she says to Lakshsman, “Rama is dependable, hence God. I am independent, hence Goddess. (278)” Again when she asks, “even if she had been impure according to moral code of society, was it right for a husband to throw away her wife?”, Pattnaik has purposely provided Sita a voice to show the age old rage and discontent created by her silent portrayal and unquestioned faith on Rama. She readily accepts the forest and finds it preferable to such an ‘intolerant society’. (278) After speaking her heart out to Lakshmana in the forest she moves to the inner forest after unbinding her hair. This is a gesture to indicate her freedom as she is, henceforth, not bound to any culture, rules or man/master. She is not an organized field but free to become a forest, a woman for the taking. Her name is no more associated with any man she knows and she moves to the inner core of the forest as an independent woman and
creates her own destiny unlike Rama who even after staying in the cultural sphere is bound to rules and his people and does injustice to his wife. Rama redeems Ahalya but punishes Sita. Injustice is done on his part. Pattnaik in the last chapter points that this was the reason of Sita’s serene smile while Rama could never again smile.

There are number of incidents the author has chosen to show that feminine essence is above cultures, rules and ideals and has more power than war fought by men. When Surpanakha meets Sita again and laughs at her poor condition after being abandoned by Rama, Sita advises her to identify the source of Shakti within herself and not to look for a man to fulfil her life. This is the lesson of self-sufficiency learnt and preached by the woman portrayed as a victim of patriarchy and culture, too helpless and modest to protest the tyranny she tolerates. She deals with the same problem with much more patience and dignity which was earlier turned into a blood-shed in which Sita was the ultimate sufferer without any fault of her own. Again, the acceptance of Kusa without any hassle shows her compassionate nature and motherly love. She is the epitome of motherhood as she is one of the few single mothers in our mythology. Despite being a queen, she doesn’t demand any right for her children and gives them birth on the land in solitude and unattended. Not only that, she avenges her humiliation by not telling her children the name of their father. The book presents Sita as the one who transforms a dacoit, Ratnakara, into one of the most acclaimed poet of all times Valmiki, the Aadikavi. She becomes his guru by inspiring him to write Rama’s story. So, according to Pattnaik’s narrative, it is Sita, who made the story of Rama audible to the world.
This is an act of forgiveness on Sita’s part. Rama definitely turned a living Sita into statue of gold for the kingly pursuit and reduces her to a material. She is a woman of dignity who after suffering so much pain and suffering lived with her head held high. Rama needed Sita even after abandoning her but Sita is self-dependent and never uses her identity to gain any favor. This belief on herself and her pride, at the very end of the epic, makes Sita leave her each worldly relation including her sons as she was not ready to let the womanhood suffer more in the name of custom, ideals, matriarchy purity and above all, culture. The end aptly justifies the title of the chapter as Sita is in fact liberated from the worldly shackles and doesn’t fall prey to it anymore.

Sita in popular imagination is one of the defining figures of womanhood. Her timeless predicament is usually connected with women in general and she becomes the primary archetype of all Indian women. Sacrifice, self-denial and unquestioning loyalty are some of the ideals associated with her image. Religious epics in India are replete with patiently self-sacrificing women who are slavishly dutiful towards their husbands. Thus she is actually ignored by modern women and feminists due to her stereotyped projection. This is due to the reason the way she has been presented in epics as silent, suppressed, sacrificing, yet a husband-praising woman. All her identity and image is linked with her relations. But the book establishes new unseen aspects of her character. She is inquisitive, protesting, avenging, rejecting and above all smiling. She is the new Sita- one who questions the standards and assumption of public morality. She is not a passive character and knows how to reply. The oral
tradition of singing Sita’s story has its root deeply embedded in India along with Chandrabati’s, Molla’s and Ranganayakamma’s renditions (though they are lesser known renditions). Here she also has a story which marks her presence and gives voice to her dissent. Contemporary versions are influenced and indebted to these stories and folktales of dissent.

An important question that Valmiki’s rendition raises through the silences and gaps and does not answer is, does Sita in the entire course of the epic avenges her humiliation or blames Rama or anyone for her misery? Does she not speak against the injustices meted out at her, at all? Or is her voice suppressed or goes unheard because this might upset the impact of the text? And the Ramayana not being a single text but being a narrative tradition, are there Ramayanas which celebrate her avenging image, free from cultural shackles? Many rewritings provide her the opportunity to avenge her disgrace and show her courage. In Sita’s Ramayana she, after going to exile, speaks to the trees of the Dandaka forest against the patriarchal norms of society and Rama. She narrates the agony most of the women in the epic face because of patriarchy which eventually is the determinant of culture and seeks refuge in nature as she is the daughter of nature.

But the book also offers a dubious perspective. Culture being a patriarchal construct becomes subjugating for Sita and she being more inclined towards nature and finding it more tender and constructive for womenfolk happily chooses it over culture, palace and Rama. So the text in a way gives a solution where it advocates
that escaping from culture and patriarchy can be the only solution to a woman’s dissent. Sita does not try to amend culture but falls prey to it, and thus victimized.

Another work *The Missing Queen* by Samhita Arni is a quest for a queen who is strangely absent and long forgotten in the shining kingdom of Ayodhya. *The Missing Queen*, a feminist rewriting of the *Ramayana*, in a contemporary setting attempts to trace Queen Sita’s mysterious disappearance and her cause of banishment and whereabouts. In her search, she encounters a number of facts and mysteries about Ayodhya and feels disillusioned with the false glorification of the state. Ayodhya in the novel is not a mythological place but a city of big malls and great technological advancement. Rama is the ruler, or say monarch, of the state, which like its ruler is beyond any flaw. His words are respected and followed. A nameless reporter comes to interview him and know about his future plans for the state. But suddenly, her single question about sudden disappearance of Rama’s wife years ago generates discomfort. The interview is stopped and she is terminated from the job. Not only this, she is secretly arrested by the Washerman (who is the head of intelligence agency of the state) and kept in an unknown far off prison. There she sees another face of Ayodhya and Lanka, very different from Valmiki’s rendition, as narrated by her fellow prisoner. Arni spins her *Ramayana* yarn supremely well, rich with texture. Layered like a palimpsest, it is a contemporary thriller; an alternate *Ramayana* which begins where most of them come to an end. It does not only try to trace Sita but also yearns for many marginalized or vilified characters or questions of the narrative. It is also a comment on the politics of power and patriarchy.
The novel belongs to the whodunit genre. The plain simple tale of the Ramayana is turned into a suspense thriller. The voices of dissent and domination are raised by the novelist in the narrative questioning many moral values central to the mainstream rendition. A young journalist suddenly creates a havoc by asking whereabouts of Sita in a live interview with Rama. A woman for whom a city was destructed, women were widowed and uncountable children were orphaned mysteriously disappears from the palace and it does not create any stir. Interestingly, the subjects of Ayodhya are also not bothered about her and she is long forgotten and put below the carpet of ‘shining’ Ayodhya. This single suppressed question unfolds many mysteries and hidden facts. The story gradually discloses that it is not Rama who holds the power of the state but a secretive society of Washerman. It is the Washerman who is responsible for Sita’s mysterious disappearance and Ayodhya’s decisions related to governance. This symbolizes that in a totalitarian regime, the secret societies or intelligence agencies take important decisions related to the state and most of the times overlook human sentiments. After her escape from the secret prison with the help of a fellow prisoner, who happens to be a Lankan, she comes in contact with Surpanakha, another maligned character in Valmiki’s narrative whose only fault was to ask a man to marry her despite being a woman. This reveals the shallowness of Ayodhya and how patriarchy overrules woman’s desire and suppresses it in the name of tradition and morality. In the very beginning of the novel the journalist meets Kaikeyi, the supreme conspirator of Rama’s exile in Valmiki’s narrative who painted her as a “beguiling siren who ruined Dasaratha and Ayodhya”. She (Kaikeyi) hints her at other versions of the story and voices of dissent in ‘shining’ Ayodhya. During her search for the missing queen of
Ayodhya, she comes across many characters who are not happy with their monarch and his decisions. First, she meets Angad, Bali’s son, who shows his resentment on Rama’s decision for his mother Tara and his style of governance. Later Surpanakha, Urmila, Kamban, Trijata etc strengthen her views regarding a totalitarian regime in Ayodhya in the guise of a just monarchy.

The story begins with Kaikeyi’s narration about the rule of monarchy of Ayodhya. She is disappointed with the present condition of Ayodhya. Later, the narrator finds a picture of Rama’s family. She becomes very disappointed when she finds that her mother, like majority of Ayodhyans, is unable to recognize Sita. She says,

I ask her to identify the women in the picture. She names Dasaratha’s queens easier but frowns when we come to the other tiny figures. ‘Can’t be sure,’ she says, mulling over the picture. ‘Could be maidservant… could be junior Ranis’.

Sita and Urmila? I ask.

She squints, and then shakes her head, give the frame back to me. ‘Can’t tell’.(14)

She finds another picture of Rama and Sita in Rama’s office. The picture is taken after Rama’s victorious return from Lanka. In this picture too Rama has occupied a large portion pushing Sita to the background. This signifies how the mainstream version of Rama’s story is given prominence and Sita’s potential narrative voice gets
erased. By juxtaposing Sita’s absence with the powerful regime of king Rama, she attempts to point out that Rama did not or could not bring Sita back despite being a just and powerful king and his kingship was important than his duty as a husband.

These are some of the incidents narrated which show how Sita’s presence or absence did not have any importance in day to day life of Ayodhya. Rama serving the state without Sita (and not even attempting to trace her) is celebrated as an act of reverence towards duty and serving the ‘higher calling’. But, absence of Sita becomes a pervasive presence by recurrent reminder of her absence. Her characters speak of many contemporary issues. In her attempt to uncover the truth behind Sita’s absence as well as to trace her, she finds a different reason for the war between Ayodhya and Lanka which is more political than personal. Sita becomes just an excuse to trigger the war. It is a scathing commentary on patriarchy, on governance in pseudo-democratic state and political control over media as well as public opinion. She also explores the question that how manuscripts were doctored, highlighting the patriarchy as well as stories that suited to the popular taste.

Arni’s tale has the flavor of suspense, contemporariness, dissent and is speculative. The novel is more realistic, political and contemporary regarding issues of patriarchy and democracy than just being a fantastical connection to birds and animals and a travelogue to a wonderland. Such narratives make the Ramayana a part of living tradition with ever pulsating questions and answers. Such kind of energetic new work illustrate its extraordinary flexibility of its capacious story telling act as a befitting
reply who consider it as a fixed, closed narrative. Such stories make the *Ramayana* an open ended narrative.

**Urmila**

As the narrative of *Ramayana* is replete with the stories of agonizing and ill-treated women, Urmila, along with Sita, is another character who is a victim of patriarchal notions of sacrifice and values. She has got very little to offer in Valmiki’s narrative. In fact, according to the story, she is put under sleep for fourteen years when her husband is in exile. Even mainstream writers for very long did not pay heed to her story and plight as Sita’s story had a greater hold on people’s mind and her journey was more adventurous. She is Lakshmana’s wife and Sita’s sister along with Mandvi (Bharata’s wife) and Shrutkirti (Shatrughan’s wife). Along with Sita, other three sisters got married to three brothers. Kavita Kane in her novel *Sita’s Sister* defies Urmila’s marginalization and provides her the centre stage. She writes-

> This book is no such reverie… it is the story of Urmila, Sita’s sister, and one of the most overlooked characters in the epic…. One woman of immense strength and conviction, stands out in the tableau of tears and tragedy- Urmila. (i)

Urmila does not fall asleep in her narrative; rather she gets awake from the slumber. In the span of fourteen years she is not overshadowed by the presence of Sita. This comes as an opportunity for her to accentuate her caliber and underscore
her presence. In her early childhood she spends most of her time taking care of her sisters. She shoulders the responsibility of her sisters when they go for education and also rebuked for slight carelessness. The book brings to light the fact that Sita, being the eldest and most favored daughter (as Janak and Sunaina do not want her to feel abandoned being an orphan) Urmila is always given the second place. Janaki, Vaidehi, Maithili, the names conferred to Sita aptly belong to her. No Swayamwara is organized for her. She is never in the race to become queen like Sita or Mandavi. Yet she is contended with what she has received. Thus, she becomes a synonym of patience, calmness and sacrifice.

The much lauded and revered union of Rama-Sita does not outshine the budding love between Urmila and Lakshman in this narrative. When Lakshman is not sure about getting married, Urmila takes the initiative and prompts her family to go for the alliance. Her mother confides in her about the fear she has about the union of four daughters getting married in the same family and she shoulders the responsibility of taking care of her sisters.

Kavita Kane’s Urmila is outspoken and strong willed. During Swamvara when Rama breaks the bow, she pacifies the angry Rishi Parashuram and her intervention in the hot debate between Lakshman and the Rishi saves the kingdom and princes from the wrath and curse of the sage. She is not scared of the wrath of the sage and does not sit back and waits for others to intervene.
The novel highlights a sharp contrast between Rama’s brothers and Sita’s sisters. Before settling the alliance of four sisters with four brothers Janak seeks the opinion and permission of their daughters while on the other hand the princes of Ayodhya are too obedient to voice their opinion. Urmila despite knowing about Lakhman’s vow to place his dedication towards Rama above marital one decides to marry him. Later in the novel, two instances demonstrate her selflessness and complacency. Kaikeyi, as not pleased with the union of Rama and Sita, (as she does not consider Sita being an orphan, an eligible suitor for her most beloved son) and shows her disapproval in the welcome ceremony and gives an edge to Urmila over Sita by calling her Maithili and Janaki. This mocking comment is immediately checked by Urmila, modestly exhibiting her large heartedness. Later on, when Mandavi remarks about Lakhshman’s unquestioned servility towards Rama, she does not lose temper and comes to grip with the issue in a sensible manner. She time and again speaks of being contended as a wife rather than a queen. Sita being calm and innocent and Mandvi agitated, ambitious and demanding, Urmila becomes the balancing force between the two and pacifies the growing tension in the palace. Manthara’s diabolic intentions to create disturbance in the family are sensed by her and she tries her best to rescue her family by the conspiracy. And her stand against Rama’s second marriage proposal characterizes her strength and fearlessness. Her decisive strength, her valor, critical and practical thinking and her knowledge related to court affairs does not let Ayodhya ruined in anarchy in the absence of any king or prince. She stands upright with her wisdom and dedication at the hour of calamity.
But, the strength of the book lies in its exquisite description of the span of fourteen years where Urmila is lonely and lives life on her own. Unlike popular narratives which focus on the deeds of Rama, Lakshmana and Sita, this brings to the centre Urmila along with many relegated members in the palace of Ayodhya. The major questions the book ponders over is - why did she stay back? Was that a mere act of obedience or surrender? Or did she know that leaving Ayodhya in that ailing condition might worsen the situation? After Rama, Lakshman and Sita leave for exile, Urmila emerges as the savior of Raghukul. She in the absence of men in the family takes the initiative to save Ayodhya from external threat and prevents the state of anarchy. Later on when Bharata is outraged at Kaikeyi and Manthara, she interferes to pacify him. These incidents show that she is everywhere in the text contrary to the Ramayana of Valmiki and her presence is voiced by her attitude and wisdom. She does not lament on her loneliness but takes initiative towards creating normalcy and cast away the problems of grief ridden family. She is the uniting force in the family.

In the span of fourteen years she brushes up her knowledge of Vedas and Upanishads and becomes a learned woman. In the novel right from the beginning she does not enjoy stereotyped works meant for women and hardly visits the kitchen. Rather she enjoys painting and exhibits her interest in arts and philosophy. Her loneliness is replaced by her passion for knowledge. Invited as a learned woman in the court of Mithila to participate in annual debates organized by the court, she gets a chance to display her learning and articulation skills. She does not waste her time
lamenting or cursing her fate but becomes a wise woman in the novel. Her grief never overshadows her patience and wisdom. Urmila’s story is provided a platform where she does not falls asleep.

Vayu Naidu in his work *Sita’s Ascent* also dedicates a chapter to Urmila and her story. Despite the novel being more Sita-centric, the writer has resourcefully by altering certain incidents and intervening in the original rendition paints Urmila in a different shade. She is the rebellious woman who flees away from the palace to assist the soon-to-be a mother and her sister, Sita in her exile. She defies moral and courtly code and questions the notion of fidelity, purity, morality and loyalty deeply embedded in the patriarchal set-up. In an instance in the novel, before fleeing away from the palace, she shaves off her beautiful, long hair to run away in disguise and exchanges her royal robes with an ascetic woman. This act though overtly being an innocent act of saving herself from the guards of the palace is in a way an act of rebellion where a married woman breaks all her marital links and denounces all the rituals which make her bound to a man and takes a refuge in forest where she does not belong to anyone. In this narrative, she remains with Sita till the narrative comes to an end. Her selfless act of serving her when everybody abandons her symbolizes her innocent and pure dedication. In a small instance in Samhita Arni’s *The Missing Queen*, it is Urmila who tells the address of Sita to the journalist and she is not satisfied with the state’s decision of banishing her sister from the “shining Ayodhya”.
These instances and works are of paramount significance when it comes to bring to the glare of publicity a character which was put at rest for ages. Urmila emerges as a complementary to Sita in many regards. She accomplishes what Sita lacks in her character in many of the narratives based on her. She comes to be viewed as a woman who is strong headed, retaliating, critical and practical in her approach towards life.

These two women characters (Sita and Urmila) show us different aspects of same narrative while rendering their stories individually, offering ‘their’ version and insight.

Draupadi

Draupadi is one of the most debated and discussed characters of the epic the Mahabharata. She, born of fire, is the supreme heroine of the epic Mahabharata. Sung as a tragic figure and later on blamed as the chief perpetrator of the fiercest battle, she is painted in multiple shades in many rewritings. She is an unwanted child, one who is not welcomed. Dhrupad, blindfolded by his desire for revenge, performs a yajna to get a son who could assassinate Dronacharya. Draupadi also comes out from that sacrificial altar along with her brother. Unlike Sita, who is also born of earth, she is not wholeheartedly accepted by her father and not a pampered kid or loved wife. She is a victim of patriarchy. Despite being wife of five husbands, she is a lonely woman. This all eventually makes her an ‘unconventional character’ as Nabaneeta Dev Sen writes in her essay “When women rewrites Ramayana.”
W. Norman Brown in the Foreword to *Yugant: The End of an Epoch* describes Drapaudi as “an arrogant, opioned [sic], selfish, untrustworthy young woman, and an inveterate troublemaker throughout her life”(ii). She is prevalently believed to be responsible for the destruction of Kuru clan. Unlike Sita, she does not denounce worldly relations even after her humiliations but trickily uses them to avenge her humiliation. Her exile is not to find an alternative to culture but to make herself and her five husbands capable enough to fight her offenders. Two major incidents are mentioned to justify her humiliation. One is of her ‘Swayamwara’ when she calls Karna, a ‘suta-putra’ (son of a charioteer) and second is her mocking comment on Duryodhana in her palace. She is thus in many versions of the *Mahabharata* held responsible for her situation as well as the fierce battle and portrayed as a culprit rather than a victim. Gourhari Behera in an article entitled as “Re(Visioning) Draupadi: Resistant Interpretation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions*” writes-

This enigmatic figure has been the subject of many contemporary writings wherein she gets a new lease of life in the hands of feminist writers who see her either as a victim of patriarchal social ideology or as a woman who is strong and resists oppressive power structures with strategies unique to her personalities. (186)

*Yajnaseni* by Pratibha Ray, *The Palace of Illusion* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Three Lords But None a Protector* by Saoli Mitra are three works chosen to look into the different aspects of character of Draupadi in contemporary
rewritings. All three works exhibit different shades of her character. She is presented as an ideal wife in Ray’s narrative while Divakaruni presents her as a revengeful and ambitious woman. Saoli Mitra focuses on her inquisitiveness and strength.

Singing Draupadi’s song, like that of Sita’s, is also a tradition in Indian folktales and songs. She is a multidimensional character and presented in multiple shades. Interestingly, to look for her voice of retaliation Vyasa’s rendition also presents her as one who does not accept subjugation and stands strongly against it. Rewritings give voice to this dissent and rejection in their own ways. She is the most suffering, sacrificing, yet most misunderstood character of all the women in the grand epic. These authors have made determined efforts for a balanced portrayal of the character and reveal the broader and deeper aspect of a woman’s mind that lay sunken in the majestic sweep of the grand Mahabharata.

Yagnaseni by Pratibha Ray speaks of victimization of Draupadi where she is a victim of patriarchal social order. The text being narrated in flashback where Draupadi is first one to fall during Pandava’s ascent to heaven, it is story of her predicament in her own version. In the text, the character of Draupadi displays various womanly virtues and shows forgiveness as the epitome of womanhood. She is rather projected as a victim of circumstances and blames herself for all the misfortunes. In this narrative, Draupadi has a loving and progressive father who arranges for every comfort and education of her. ‘Born nubile’, as she says in the beginning, she is a docile character. Hardly she stands against tyranny and speaks for her sake. She accepts Arjuna on the behest of Krishna and marries other four
brothers only to comply her mother-in-law’s wish. When she encounters the terrible
decision of brothers to comply with their mother’s order, she after contemplating
speaks,

I, Yajnaseni, born of the sacrificial altar for the preservation of
Dharma! If, impelled by greed for this mortal body, heroes like
Pandavas had bound themselves by a vow to their mother, then in their
dharma-yajna let this body become an oblation! So let everyone be
happy getting united. Why should I be an obstacle? (63)

Her life is a series of struggle. Trying hard to adjust in her new life and with
her five husbands she bears humiliation by Karna, Kauravas as well as Arjuna.
Karna avenges her by humiliating her time and again for being wife of five
husbands. On the other hand Kauravas too, mock at her, for her unusual situation of
being a wife of five husbands. Once saved by Karna while drowning, she is mocked
by Dussashan for her loneliness despite having five husbands. The only time when
she gets space in the text is when she speaks against her humiliation in Kuru court.
She challenges patriarchal standards which make her a slave of Duryodhana without
her consent. Her education makes her rational and she is humiliated for being
rational too. When she protests against Yudhishthira’s decision of putting her at
stake, Shakuni speaks-

The greatest offence a woman commits is to try to be learned. It is
because she became wise and scholarly that her condition is thus. If
she had groveled at our feet and begged, perhaps she might have escaped such a gross insult. Just as knowledge and power enhance a man’s attraction, similarly ignorance and helplessness increase the charm of a woman. However, Draupadi, strengthened by pride in her learning and wisdom, is like a burning tongue of a flame. Can anybody have pity on her? (67)

The narrator twice provides her a chance to speak. First when she is humiliated in the kuru court after the dice-game and she is not left with any option. There she questions Yudhishthira along with all members present in the sabha and is not answered. And secondly, when she is humiliated by Keechaka and Yudhishthira overlooks her agony as he is busy in the dice-game, again. Later on when her ordeal is over she is also presented as a clever woman who sharply gains back all the wealth her husband had lost in the game when she is provided two boons.

As a wife, she is presented as a devoted and sacrificing wife who is equal partner in happiness and sorrow of her husbands. Initially jealous, later she heartily accepts Subhardra and other co-wives as well. She leaves her five sons with Subhadra and moves to the forest to accompany her husbands in exile. She considers herself responsible for the unfortunate happenings in their lives and takes this as a responsibility to complement for their loss. Moreover she eats once a day only to ensure that Pandavas get two square meals a day. She explains to the wives of Krishna the role of an ideal wife where she says that sacrifice is the ultimate virtue of woman. She dedicates her life is nurturing people around her. Forgiveness is also
her supreme quality. She forgives Karna, Jaydratha and even Ashwatthama. She is thus narrated as a woman mostly resilient, non-retaliating and conforming to social ideals.

Originally written in Odia, Ray’s novel is not a radical presentation of character of Draupadi. She is moreover presented as a victim where she does not speak much against her subjugation. Not only Draupadi but Kunti and other women characters too in this novel are meek and submissive. Written specifically for Indian readers or say local readers, she presents Draupadi as an ideal woman. She is one of the ‘panch-sati’ and the writer tries to maintain her character conforming to the model of an ideal woman. On the other hand, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s Panchali is altogether a new woman for whom pride is the supreme quality. This novel represents a new radical Draupadi. Unlike Krishnaa of Pratibha Ray’s narrative, she is neither a beloved daughter of Drupad nor educated or trained like her brother. She is a lonely child. She is not born nubile in this narrative and the novel is a bildungsroman. Narrating the story of the Mahabharata from Draupadi’s perspective, the author gives a feminist twist to the tale. In her note she writes- “I was let unsatisfied by the portrayal of the women… They remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons” (xiv)

The bond of love and the feeling of connectedness between Kunti and Draupadi in Yajnaseni is replaced by mutual rivalry between them in this novel. She is not
offered any help from anyone in this narrative but learns through her own acts and mistakes. The novel traces the psychological evolution of Draupadi from a stubborn girl to a mother who forgives the assassinator of her children and brother.

Draupadi accompanies the Pandavas in exile though she was not sentenced to spend her life in forest. Divakaruni says that she takes this decision to keep the Pandavas reminded of the humiliation they, and especially Draupadi, had undergone. She consistently blames them for their failure and keeps the flame of revenge alive in them. She does not sit back and satisfies their appetite but utilizes this period to make a platform for her revenge against the Kauravas.

One of the important aspects of the novel is Draupadi’s emotional inclination towards Karna. Calling Karna’s love a ‘fire’, she always has a space for him in her heart. Even at the last moment of her life, she imagines herself with Karna and not with the Pandavas. Despite being wife to five men, her attachment towards Karna never fades. This represents her as a mysterious woman who is not bound by any rules.

Saoli Mitra in her dramatic presentation of three incidents of The Mahabharata, the first one being the swayamwara and the other narrating the ill treatment of Draupadi in public court has craftily argued for the case of Draupadi in her drama. The last scene is of the last journey of Pandavas along with Panchali. After Swayamwara, Draupadi is married to other four brothers along with Arjuna to make Kunti’s words true. Nobody cares for asking her will.
Kathak: … So everything was decided. But no one even thought of asking Draupadi…

Draupadi, the king’s beloved daughter, became the property of Pandavas. (24)

The title ‘Dharmaraj’ conferred to Yudhishthira is questioned by Draupadi and she asks the cause of not sending Yudhishthira to hell. She says-

Believe me, Sirs. Sometimes I feel that if I ever got the chance to go to heaven I’d ask why Yudhishthira wasn’t sent to hell for this sin! What for heaven’s sake, is the rule up there? (33)

‘Draupadi could be staked or not? Could Yudhishthira alone decide to use her as a pawn. Or why was she used as pawn? Why is her consent so insignificant? These are certain ever pulsating question of Draupadi which always remain unanswered. She is time and again degraded in the course of the epic by men, including her husbands.

The unfortunate incident of “cheer-haran” is always associated with arrival of Krishna and saving of Draupadi from disgrace. But in this dramatic presentation there is no arrival of Krishna. He does not come and the scene ends with Draupadi crying and falling, holding her only piece of cloth. Why doesn’t Krishna come, is a question to ponder. Neither he comes, nor Draupadi calls for him. The narrator thus, in her effort to make the epic contemporary try to overrule any superhuman interference. And secondly more than hailing Krishna as the supreme protector the
representation of Draupadi as the victim is more important. Intervention of Krishna is a symbol of intervention of patriarchy which is presented as mandatory for a woman to being saved from disgrace. Draupadi was saved or not!!! This question is left unanswered in the play.

The second and last act of the play is based on the last journey of the Pandavas when they ascend to swarg where Draupadi is the first one to fall. In the play, after her fall she looks for Bhima as she finds him much close to her in comparison to other men in her life. She finds solace with him only. Her lifelong wait for a protector ends with Bhim.

The three dimensions of Draupadi’s character are thus presented in these three narratives. Yajnaseni establishes her as a sacrificing and submissive woman whose virtue lies in making others happy. On the other hand Divakaruni presents her as an ambitious woman who provokes people around her to avenge her humiliation. Saoli Mitra focusses on her retaliation and her psychological state during her torments. All three present her suppressed desires at the last stage of her life. Ray’s Yajnaseni, who is most of the time called Krishnaa in the narrative, chooses Krishna as her last refuge, which means a submission to divinity while Panchali of Divakaruni’s narrative chooses Karna which symbolizes her choice of love over social and moral restriction at last stage of her life. Draupadi of Mitra’s play wants Bhima to be her husband in the next birth as she finds him most comforting, loving and protective. Thus the three different works exhibit three unique dimensions of her
character which makes her an “enigmatic woman” (186) as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni says.

Besides these three characters, there are many other women characters in the epic who are the central characters of many retellings and their perspective of the incidents of the epic changes the flavor of the story. Kaikeyi, Shoorpanakha, Kunti, Gandhari etc are such characters and these feminist retellings give new interpretation to the age old texts and also look for their contemporary relevance. Feminist rewritings are an attempt to look for the feminist voices and issues that have remained suppressed in the mainstream renditions of the epics. Characters of Sita, Urmila or Draupadi are given new shades by contemporary writers making them come out more revitalized and afresh. Contemporary feminist rewritings have become tools in the hands of these writers to pose resistance to the entire patriarchal structure that has subjugated and suppressed women’s voices in the much revered epic tradition.