

Performing Resistance: Feminist Theatre and the Politics of Revisionist Mythology in India

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Abstract

Mythology holds a central position in the cultural consciousness of India, shaping not just religious and moral codes but also social and gendered hierarchies. The Ramayana has historically reinforced patriarchal norms by valorising idealized models of femininity, obedience, and sacrifice. The revision of mythology uncovers new critical dimensions, making room for several interpretations and multi-layered stories to branch out. Modern Indian Feminist Theatre has increasingly turned to revisionist mythology as a space of resistance, reclaiming silenced histories and re-interpreting canonical tales through feminist lens. Through close readings of *What She Said* (2019) by Gauri Ramnarayan, *Sita's Daughters* (2015) by Mallika Sarabhai, and *Mandodari* (2005) by Varsha Adjala, the paper explores how feminist dramaturgy reclaims mythological women from narrative silence and marginalization. Adrienne Rich observes that revision is not merely a chapter in cultural history, it is “an act of survival” (Rich, 1972, p. 18). Feminist Theatre reimagines female characters from mythology not as moral archetypes but as political subjects who interrogate ideals of chastity, loyalty and sacrifice. Performance emerges here as a mode of resistance, one that exposes the ideological labor of mythology in sustaining gendered power relations. By reclaiming these narratives, these plays subvert traditional mythological hierarchies creating counter-narratives that are both artistic and activist. Drawing on Richard Schechner's performance theory, the paper views mythological performance as a repeatable yet transformable cultural practice. This research aims to critically analyze how feminist theatre uses revision and performance to subvert hegemonic narratives, thus contributing to the larger discourse on gender, mythology, and performance in theatre and literature.

Keywords: feminist theatre, revisionist mythology, *Ramayana*, performance studies, gender

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Introduction

In India, mythology is not ancient history. It lives in temples, in cinema, in legal judgments, in the way families speak about what a good woman looks like. Written between 500 BCE and 100 BCE, the Ramayana, also called the Adikavya (meaning first or original epic), is one of India's two foundational Sanskrit epics, attributed to the sage Valmiki. It is an age-old story of love, righteousness, devotion and sacrifice.

Ram, the crown prince of Ayodhya is banished from his kingdom due to a vow his father made. The Ramayana follows Prince Rama of Ayodhya, who is exiled to the forest for fourteen years when his stepmother Kaikeyi invokes a long-standing promise from his father King Dasharatha. Rama being the Maryada purushottam, meaning the most righteousness among men, obeys without protest. During the exile, his wife Sita is abducted by the demon king Ravana of Lanka, prompting Ram to build a bridge across the sea, wage a catastrophic war, and kill Ravana to reclaim her. Ram's familial obedience is celebrated as the highest dharma; his military campaign is framed as the righteous restoration of cosmic order. Yet Sita, whose suffering occasioned the entire war, is asked at its conclusion to prove her purity by walking into fire. The thousands of women widowed by the same war are not mourned, they are incidental.

Revisioning mythology uncovers new critical dimensions, creating fertile ground for multiple interpretations and layered narratives to emerge. Adrienne Rich describes revision as, “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (Rich, 1972, p. 18). Modern Indian feminist theatre has increasingly turned to revisionist mythology as a space of resistance, reclaiming silenced histories and re-interpreting canonical tales through a feminist lens. This study explores how feminist playwrights engage with mythology as a dynamic and performative archive. To understand why feminist theatre turns to revisionist mythology, we first need to understand the power of mythology itself. In India, mythology is not merely folklore. It is a cultural operating system, it shapes religious life, moral codes, and, crucially, gendered hierarchies. The Ramayana is a foundational text. But it is also, feminist scholars have long argued, a founding document of patriarchal expectation.

Sita is valorised for her silent suffering. Mandodari is praised for her loyalty to a husband who represents everything she privately opposes. Surpanakha is punished for expressing desire. These are not just ancient stories, they are templates that have been, and continue to be, applied to living women. The question this paper asks is: what does feminist theatre do when it takes these templates apart?

This paper brings together three plays – *Mandodari* by Varsha Adjala (2005), *Sita's Daughters* (2015) by Mallika Sarabhai and *What She Said* (2019) by Gauri Ramnarayan, that have largely been studied in isolation. By reading them not as individual works but as a collective grammar of feminist dramaturgy. The paper attempts to demonstrate how Adjala, Sarabhai, and Ramnarayan represent three distinct but deeply complementary strategies of resistance: internal transformation, genre disruption, and narrative reclamation.

Through dramaturgical techniques and aesthetic strategies, these plays challenge the patriarchal ideologies embedded in the mainstream narratives of the Ramayana. They foreground questions of voice, agency and space constructing alternate discourses that

interrogate the oppression, victimization, marginalization and subjugation of female characters.

Within this framework, performance becomes an act of survival and resistance. It offers a powerful medium through which marginalized characters like Soorrpanakha, Mandodari, Urmila, Kaikaeyi and others are granted narrative voice and performative agency. By reclaiming these narratives, feminist revisionist plays subvert established mythological hierarchies and generate counter-narratives that are both activist and artistic.

Research Objectives

This paper will focus on the select plays to analyze how their aesthetics, dramaturgy, and politics contribute to the larger project of feminist resistance. It will draw on theories of Performance Studies and Revisionist Mythology to investigate how these plays reimagine female identity and expression that have long been suppressed within dominant cultural discourses. In doing so, the research aims to contribute to the evolving discourse on feminist theatre and the critical potential of theatre as a political art form. By situating these plays within the discourse of feminist revisionist mythmaking, this research interrogates how contemporary theatre reclaims women's voices and uses revisionist mythology to create gynocentric mythology in the Indian context.

This paper asks: How does feminist theatre use revision and performance to subvert hegemonic mythological narratives, and what does this contribute to the larger discourse on gender, mythology, and performance?

Three specific objectives guide the research:

- To examine how feminist dramaturgy reclaims mythological women from narrative silence and marginalization
- To analyze how performance transforms mythological archetypes into political subjects

Methodology

Before turning to the plays, it is important to establish the two theoretical lenses through which this analysis operates. Adrienne Rich, in her landmark 1971 essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," argues that revision, the act of re-reading and rewriting inherited cultural texts, is not a literary exercise but a political and survival act. For Rich, women who return to canonical texts and refuse their terms are not being merely creative; they are doing something necessary for their own existence. Feminist theatre extends this imperative from the page to the body, making revision collective, embodied, and public, performed before a live audience in real time.

Richard Schechner's (2017) performance theory complements Rich (1972) by providing a framework for understanding how this revision operates on stage. Schechner argues that performance is "restored behavior" (Schechner, 2017, p. 103), cultural practice that is repeatable yet transformable. The same myth, performed again and again, is never identical, because each performance is an interpretation. Feminist dramaturgy exploits precisely this gap: taking mythological material the audience already knows, and redirecting its ideological force. Together, Rich and Schechner allow us to understand these plays not simply as retellings, but as political interventions, acts of survival staged in performance.

Analysis

Adjala's *Mandodari* is perhaps the most structurally inventive of the three plays, and its central dramaturgical strategy is what we might call internal transformation: the play works entirely within the mythology's own narrative framework, using its plot to overturn its ideology. The play is structured as a chess game between Mandodari and Kaaldevata, the Lord of Time and Death. This is not metaphor, it is the actual dramatic architecture of the play, and it is through this structure that Adjala makes her most powerful argument.

For Rich (1972), the chess game is the play's act of survival. When Kaaldevata declares Lanka's destruction unalterable, Mandodari does not grieve or plead, she challenges. She invokes Savitri and Anusuya, women from the same mythological tradition who defied death and stopped the sun, to authorize her resistance. This is revision working at its most sophisticated: Adjala uses mythology against itself, retrieving from within the tradition the very precedents that authorize female defiance. The master's tools, turned against the master's house.

What the canonical Ramayana most systematically suppresses about Mandodari is her intelligence, and this is precisely what Adjala foregrounds as the primary site of female subjectivity. From the moment Ravana announces Sita's abduction, Mandodari's counsel is correct at every point. She warns him immediately: "Kidnapping a helpless woman is not a trivial matter" (Adjala, 2005). She appeals to Bibhishana. She devises battle strategy. She visits Sita in the Ashokvatika. And at every turn she is defeated, not by superior argument, but by the patriarchy's refusal to hear her. Ravana dismisses her with the line that crystallizes the play's political argument: "You are a foolish woman. You dare to talk back" (Adjala, 2005). In Schechner's (2017) terms, this is the mythology performing itself, restoring the behavior of female silencing, and Adjala's play is the feminist intervention that transforms that restoration into critique.

The Sita scene in the Ashokvatika is the play's most morally complex moment, and it deserves particular analytical attention. Mandodari does not come to Sita with sisterly solidarity. She comes with a political proposition: surrender to Ravana to stop the war, because the sacrifice of one woman could save thousands of lives. This is the play's most unsettling feminist gesture, staging not a simple alliance between women, but a collision between two forms of female consciousness: Mandodari's political realism against Sita's devotional idealism. Adjala refuses to adjudicate between them. Neither position is entirely vindicated, and neither woman escapes the play's moral complexity.

In the climax of the play, Kaaldevata congratulates Mandodari on her honour as "a great sati" after Ravana's death. She laughs, loudly, scornfully and announces that she has won, because Ravana's death and redemption was her real goal all along: "The arrow that killed Ravana actually released his soul and gave the egoistic man his salvation. Though I am widowed now, I am a happy woman" (Adjala, 2005). This is the strongest argument in the entire compilation: what mythology reads as female submission, the loyal wife mourning her husband, is retroactively revealed as female strategy, the longest and most patient game.

However, Adjala does not allow this victory to stand uncomplicated, and this is what distinguishes her dramaturgy from simple reversal. Mandodari's closing lament "Why should women be left behind to lament their loss? My lament is drowned by the sound of war drums" (Adjala, 2005) insists that the victory comes at enormous personal cost. The play

ends not in triumph but in collapse: Mandodari falls near the throne as the gandharva's cry fills the air. In keeping faith with this ambiguity, Adjala produces what Rich (1972) would recognize as genuine revision: not the replacement of one myth with another, but the honest exposure of what the original myth cost the women within it.

If Adjala's strategy is internal transformation, Sarabhai's is genre disruption. *Sita's Daughters* (2015) is a performance-lecture hybrid that moves between mythology, contemporary realism, comedy, historical narrative, and direct audience address, sometimes within the same scene. This formal restlessness is not incidental but ideological: by refusing to settle into any single genre, Sarabhai forces her audience to perform different kinds of attention, making it impossible for them to receive the play as pure entertainment or pure scholarship. The audience is constantly being repositioned, as witnesses, as participants, as inheritors of the mythology's unfinished business.

The play's opening is its most important political gesture. Before anything else, a poem is recited from the wings: "She whom Rama burned was Sita / She whom Rama abandoned was Sita / Who was she? Who was Sita?" (Sarabhai, 2015). Sita is introduced not through her celebrated virtues, her beauty, her loyalty, her purity; but through what was done to her. This is Rich's (1972) revisionary impulse in its purest theatrical form: refusing to accept received knowledge, insisting that the first question asked of the mythology must be a question, not an affirmation. The play begins in interrogation and never entirely leaves it.

Sarabhai's Sita is the most politically confrontational in the compilation. During the abduction sequence, she turns directly on Rama with a line that has no precedent in canonical tellings: "Shame Rama. How could you be tricked? What hidden motive did you have? To degrade me? To prove yourself what a leader you are? Or so that you could have your glorious and bloody war?" (Sarabhai, 2015). This is not a passive victim lamenting her fate, this is a woman interrogating her husband's possible complicity in her own suffering. In staging this possibility, Sarabhai performs what Rich (1972) calls the most dangerous act of revision: questioning not the villain but the hero, not the enemy but the beloved.

The play's treatment of the agni pariksha, the fire ordeal, is the clearest demonstration of Schechner's (2017) transformability in the entire compilation. In canonical tellings, the fire trial is read as proof of Sita's divine purity: she walks in and emerges unharmed because she is untouched, therefore chaste, therefore worthy of Rama's acceptance. In Sarabhai's version, Sita walks into the fire saying: "Not to prove myself to you, but to show you how small a man you have become and how unchanged I am by the total destruction of my image of you" (Sarabhai, 2015). The same event, the same fire, the same body, the same mythological moment, is re-performed and yields an entirely different meaning. The trial of purity becomes an act of contempt. The proof of female virtue becomes the exposure of male inadequacy. This is precisely what Schechner (2017) means when he argues that performance transforms restored behavior: the behavior is identical, but the cultural meaning it produces is completely inverted.

The play's most significant structural contribution is its transition from mythology to the contemporary. Sarabhai introduces three women from recent Indian history and presents them without apology as Sita's daughters: a teacher raped by her school principal who fights for justice through a hostile legal system; a doctor who establishes the first amniocentesis clinic in India only to watch it become a tool for female foeticide; and the historical Amrita Devi, who died hugging a tree in 1730 when the Maharaja's army came to cut it down. These

women share nothing with Sita biologically or historically. What they share is the structure of their situation: the demand for silence, the sacrifice of their bodies to male authority, and the refusal to comply. In framing them as Sita's daughters, Sarabhai transforms mythology from an archived story into a living analytical framework, a lens through which the continuing reality of gendered violence can be named, understood, and resisted.

Ramnarayan's dramaturgical strategy is the most formally direct of the three: narrative reclamation. Six women who are present in the Ramayana but absent from its meaning: Urmila, Manthara, Surpanakha, Mandodari, Tara, and Shanta. They are each given a direct first-person monologue. Each begins the same way: "Aham Urmila. I am Urmila" (Ramnarayan, 2019). This is a grammatical as well as political act. In the canonical Ramayana, these women exist in the third person, they are described, positioned, judged, and disposed of by a narrative voice that belongs to someone else. The first-person monologue is the formal instrument of revision: the subject of the sentence is finally the speaker, not the story told about her.

Urmila's monologue establishes the play's central analytical argument: that the Ramayana's silencing of women is not incidental but structural. Urmila excelled at every subject, outperformed every competitor, impressed every teacher and was consistently overlooked in favour of Sita, who achieved considerably less. This is precisely the mechanism that Rich (1972) identifies in canonical literature more broadly: the suppression of women's achievement through the strategic redirection of attention. Ramnarayan makes this suppression visible not by arguing against it, but by simply giving Urmila the time and space to describe it.

The play's rehabilitation of the Ramayana's "villains" is one of its most significant contributions to the feminist revisionist mythmaking project. Manthara, perhaps the most universally condemned character in the epic, is revealed as a grieving mother with a legitimate political grievance. Dasharatha did promise Bharata the throne; he did break that promise. Manthara's analysis of the situation was correct, her political intervention was coherent, and the catastrophe that followed was the result of Dasharatha's broken word as much as her scheming. In giving Manthara this complexity, Ramnarayan makes the play's most demonized woman its most realistic political actor. Surpanakha, who appears in canonical tellings as grotesque, predatory, and justly punished, insists on her real name: "Aham Minakshi. I am Minakshi" (Ramnarayan, 2019). She was given the name Surpanakha, "one with grotesque nails", by the epic that needed to justify her mutilation. By reclaiming Minakshi, she reclaims the identity that preceded the mythology's violence against her. Ramnarayan embeds her personal story within a postcolonial critique: her grandmother Tataka's land was colonized by the Aryan kingdoms whose armies now call Surpanakha a demoness. Her "villainy" is the violence of the occupied fighting back against the occupier.

The play's most unexpected and perhaps most powerful revisionary gesture is the revelation of Surpanakha's secret relationship to Sita during her final exile. After the Lanka war, Sita is abandoned by Rama and wanders pregnant in the forest. It is Surpanakha, who instigated her abduction, who watched her being dragged by the hair into Ravana's chariot, who secretly tends the garden where Sita walks with her twins. The mythology's greatest female villain becomes its most hidden female protector. This is Schechner's (2017) concept of restored behavior taken to its logical extreme: the same character, restored to performance through a feminist lens, produces a completely different moral identity. And it makes an argument that no canonical telling could afford to make, that the enmity between these women was

manufactured by the mythology, and that beneath it lay a solidarity the patriarchal text could not accommodate.

The play's final movement belongs to Shanta, Rama's sister, abandoned by Dasharatha at birth, mentioned in the Ramayana only as a footnote, and never heard. Rama comes to her in despair, having failed his father, his wife, his sons, and his own principles. He prostrates before her, the god lying full-length at the feet of the woman the mythology forgot, and she gives him not comfort but philosophical instruction: "Sorrow is the root of life. We are human and so we grieve. Because we grieve, we pity. Because we pity, we bond. Because we bond, we love. Because we love we find joy. Rama, my dear brother, can we find joy without grief?" (Ramnarayan, 2019). In giving the play's deepest wisdom to the mythology's most completely erased woman, Ramnarayan makes her most powerful argument: that what is lost when women are silenced is not simply their stories but their knowledge, their ways of understanding the world that the patriarchal order cannot generate, and that are therefore suppressed rather than accommodated.

Discussion

All three plays converge on a single structural insight that constitutes this paper's central finding: patriarchal mythology does not silence women by removing them from the narrative. It silences them by allowing them to appear only within narratives that frame their subordination as virtue, their suffering as nobility, and their erasure as natural. Mandodari is present in the Ramayana but only as a mourning wife. Urmila is present but only as Sita's devoted sister. Surpanakha is present but only as a cautionary grotesque. Feminist theatre's revisionary power lies in restoring their stories without the frame: giving them back their first-person voice, their correct names, their unsuppressed intelligence, and their secret solidarities. In doing so, these plays do not merely retell the mythology. They expose the machinery that made one narrative dominant and all others invisible and, in that exposure, they perform what Adrienne Rich (1972) called, with complete precision, an act of survival.

Conclusion

The central finding of this paper is that feminist theatre in India uses revisionist mythology not merely as artistic reimagination, but as a deliberate political act, one that transforms mythological women from passive archetypes into active political subjects who interrogate the very ideals of chastity, obedience, and sacrifice that the Ramayana has historically imposed upon them.

This research contributes to two areas of scholarly discourse. To gender studies, it offers a textually grounded analysis of how patriarchal mythology manufactures female archetypes and how feminist theatre dismantles them. To performance studies, it demonstrates Schechner's (2017) transformability as a specifically feminist tool.

Why does this matter? Because mythology is a living ideological force that continues to shape how women are judged, silenced, and made to suffer in the present. When Mandodari's counsel is dismissed, when Sita is asked to walk into fire, when Urmila is abandoned without a word, these are not ancient injustices. They are scripts that are still being followed. To revise them on stage, before a live audience, is to intervene in that force in real time.

Thus, performance itself is a form of resistance. The stage is not merely a space of representation, it is a site of political struggle, where stories that have long defined womanhood can be interrupted, contested, and rewritten. These plays remind us that the question of whose narratives survive is never just a literary question. It is always, and urgently, a question of power.

By giving voice to the silenced, feminist theatre does not merely revise the past. It reshapes the future.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

I declare that I used Claude AI (developed by Anthropic) solely for proofreading and language editing of this manuscript. The AI was used to improve grammar, clarity, and style, but it did not generate any of the paper's ideas, arguments, data, analyses, or original content. All intellectual contributions, including the conception, design, analysis, interpretation, and writing of the paper, are my own.

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