

Mythical Paradigms: Influence and Adaptation in Contemporary Indian English Literature

Shiksha,

Sriganganagar, Rajasthan, India
Dallybishnoi.bishnoi@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines how mythical paradigms are reinterpreted in contemporary Indian English literature. Myth is not merely a remnant of tradition but a living framework that continues to shape cultural identity, social critique, and narrative form. Drawing on Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism, Mircea Eliade's notion of sacred time, Joseph Campbell's monomyth, and postcolonial theories of adaptation, the study analyzes how selected authors—Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Amish Tripathi—adapt myths for modern contexts. The analysis demonstrates that these writers do not passively reproduce myth but actively reshape it to interrogate history, ecology, gender, and popular culture, thereby showing myth's continuing relevance in the Indian imagination.

Introduction

Myth occupies a foundational role in India's cultural and literary traditions, embodied in the Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, Purāṇas, folktales, and local legends. For Indian English writers, myth is a versatile tool: it carries cultural memory, provides archetypal structures, and opens spaces for postcolonial negotiation. While colonial discourse often dismissed myth as superstition, contemporary Indian authors reclaim it as a source of identity, resistance, and creativity.

This paper explores how myths are reinterpreted in Indian English literature, focusing on five writers: Rushdie, Ghosh, Roy, Divakaruni, and Amish. Their works demonstrate myth's adaptive power—serving as allegory for nationhood (Midnight's Children), ecological ethics (The Hungry Tide), local memory (The God of Small Things), feminist retelling (The Palace of Illusions), and popular myth-making (Amish's novels).

Research Questions:

1. How do these authors engage with myth to construct identity and critique society?
2. In what ways do they adapt traditional myths to contemporary contexts?
3. What theoretical frameworks illuminate these adaptations?

Theoretical Framework

To understand myth in literature, this study draws on multiple perspectives:

Northrop Frye (Archetypes): Myths provide universal narrative patterns (hero, quest, fall, renewal). Helpful for seeing continuities but limited in addressing cultural specificity.

Mircea Eliade (Sacred Time): Myths connect societies to cosmic order. Relevant in texts like Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* but less applicable to subversive adaptations.

Joseph Campbell (Monomyth): Hero's journey structure fits epic retellings like Divakaruni and Amish, though criticized for androcentric bias.

Claude Lévi-Strauss & Roland Barthes (Structuralism/Semiotics): Myths encode cultural contradictions and ideologies; useful in Roy's fragmented myth-making.

Postcolonial Theory (Bhabha, Spivak): Myths as hybrid, contested, and politically charged narratives; central to Rushdie and Divakaruni.

Adaptation Theory (Linda Hutcheon): Adaptation as creative transformation, not repetition—key to all five authors' works. This blended framework enables an analysis that recognizes both universal mythic patterns and their local, political rearticulations.

Review of Literature**1. Myth in Indian English Literature: General Studies**

Scholars have long recognized the centrality of myth in Indian writing in English. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, in *Indian Writing in English* (1962), observes that Indian English writers often draw on myth and history to assert cultural identity. Meenakshi Mukherjee's *The Twice Born Fiction* (1971) highlights the negotiation between tradition and modernity in Indian English novels, many of which employ myth as a symbolic resource. Myth criticism has also influenced the study of Indian English literature. C.D. Narasimhaiah emphasized archetypal and symbolic readings, while contemporary critics like Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Aijaz Ahmad situate myth in the postcolonial context, questioning its ideological functions. Recent scholarship acknowledges myth as both a site of continuity and contestation: it embodies cultural heritage but also provides tools for feminist reinterpretation, ecological ethics, and popular adaptation.

2. Salman Rushdie

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) has attracted immense critical attention for its use of myth and history. Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture* (1994), reads Rushdie's narrative as an example of hybridity, blending mythic allegory with historical reality. Critics like Neil ten Kortenaar and Timothy Brennan note how Rushdie employs myth as a metaphor for India's fragmented nationhood. Studies emphasize his subversive use of myth—not as sacred truth but as a narrative strategy that destabilizes colonial historiography.

3. Amitav Ghosh

Ghosh's engagement with myth is frequently discussed in ecological and cultural contexts. In *The Hungry Tide* (2004), scholars such as Anshuman Mondal and John Thieme highlight the role of the Bon Bibi myth as an ethical and ecological paradigm for the Sundarbans community. Ghosh's broader work demonstrates how myths mediate between local traditions and global ecological concerns. Critics argue that his use of myth resists the universalizing tendencies of Western modernity by foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems.

4. Arundhati Roy

Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) incorporates fragmented local myths, folktales, and oral traditions. Critics like Ranjan Ghosh and Anna Clarke point out how Roy uses myth to represent memory, trauma, and marginal voices. The novel's mythic references are not central epics but smaller, localized stories that echo through personal and political histories. Scholars often note how Roy destabilizes "grand myths" of nation and progress by foregrounding fractured, minor mythologies.

5. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) has been widely studied as a feminist retelling of the *Mahābhārata*. Critics such as Vrinda Nabar and Mandakranta Bose note how she re-centers Draupadi's voice, thereby challenging patriarchal versions of epic myth. Studies highlight how Divakaruni combines myth with contemporary concerns of gender and agency, making the ancient epic resonate with modern readers. Her work contributes to a growing field of feminist myth revisionism in Indian English literature.

6. Amish Tripathi

Amish Tripathi represents a popular, commercial engagement with myth. His *Shiva Trilogy* (2010–13) and *Ram Chandra Series* (2015–) have attracted both popular acclaim and academic attention. Critics like Arpita Chakraborty and Rohit Chopra note that Amish secularizes myth by portraying gods as historical heroes, thereby making mythology accessible to modern readers. His blending of modern language, historical imagination, and spiritual themes demonstrates how myth can function in popular culture as both entertainment and cultural revival.

Synthesis of Literature Review

The existing scholarship demonstrates that myth in Indian English literature is neither uniform nor static. Rushdie uses myth as allegory and satire; Ghosh integrates it into ecological discourse; Roy invokes local myths to explore trauma; Divakaruni offers feminist reinterpretation; and Amish adapts myths for popular readership. However, there is limited comparative scholarship that brings these diverse strategies together. This study contributes by situating these authors within a broader discussion of mythical paradigms as adaptive, contested, and

dynamic frameworks in contemporary Indian English writing.

Textual Analysis

1. Salman Rushdie: Myth as Allegory of Nationhood

In *Midnight's Children* (1981), Salman Rushdie intertwines myth, history, and personal memory to construct an allegory of India's postcolonial nationhood. The protagonist Saleem Sinai, born at the midnight of India's independence, embodies both mythical and historical significance. His telepathic powers, which connect him to other "midnight's children," recall archetypal myths of magical communities and divine visionaries.

Rushdie's use of myth is not reverential but subversive. Hindu and Islamic myths are reworked alongside Western tropes to destabilize the notion of historical "truth." Saleem's narrative is framed by exaggeration, satire, and magical realism, which critics interpret as a modern myth-making strategy. The midnight children are mythic symbols of India's pluralism and fragmentation: their powers embody potential unity, yet their discord mirrors the nation's disintegration.

Rushdie also adapts myth as parody. The figure of Shiva, Saleem's counterpart, invokes the Hindu god of destruction but is reimagined as a fierce, violent adversary. This secularization of myth underscores Rushdie's critique of political corruption and authoritarianism. Myth here functions less as sacred tradition and more as a narrative tool to dramatize the instability of postcolonial identity.

2. Amitav Ghosh: Myth and Ecological Consciousness

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) demonstrates how myth operates within ecological and cultural frameworks. Set in the Sundarbans, the novel integrates the myth of Bon Bibi, a local goddess who protects the forest dwellers from tigers and demons. The myth is embedded in the daily lives of the marginalized communities, shaping their ethical relationship with nature.

Through Bon Bibi's story, Ghosh presents myth as a living paradigm of ecological balance. The goddess demands humility before nature, reminding humans of their place within a fragile ecosystem. This challenges modern scientific approaches represented by the cetologist Piyali Roy, whose

research contrasts with the community's mythical worldview.

Ghosh positions myth not as superstition but as a valid epistemology that sustains cultural resilience. By juxtaposing myth with environmental politics—such as displacement, migration, and conservation—he highlights how traditional narratives can critique modern ecological exploitation. Myth here is adaptive: it mediates between local wisdom and global environmental concerns.

3. Arundhati Roy: Fragmented Myths and Local Memory

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) employs myth in subtle, fragmented ways to capture personal trauma and cultural memory. Unlike Rushdie or Ghosh, Roy does not invoke grand epics; instead, she draws on localized stories, oral traditions, and childhood imagination.

The novel's narrative is mythopoeic in its treatment of time, memory, and transgression. The twins Estha and Rahel construct private myths—childlike narratives that blend with folklore and social taboos. These "small" myths reflect how marginalized individuals make sense of trauma and forbidden love. For example, the recurring image of the river functions as a mythical symbol of fate, memory, and death, echoing Indian folklore about sacred waters.

Roy's strategy is to dismantle dominant national and religious myths. While the "grand narratives" of Indian modernity celebrate progress and unity, her localized myths reveal fractured identities and silenced histories. Myth in Roy's work thus resists cultural homogenization, foregrounding the small, the broken, and the suppressed.

4. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: Feminist Retelling of Epic Myth

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) is a retelling of the *Mahābhārata* from the perspective of Draupadi. By re-centering the narrative through a female voice, Divakaruni challenges patriarchal myth-making that traditionally portrays Draupadi as an object of fate or desire rather than as a subject with agency.

The novel transforms the epic into a feminist meditation on desire, power, and destiny. Draupadi is portrayed as a narrator who reclaims her story,

questioning the injustices of her polyandrous marriage and her role in the war. Myth here becomes a site of resistance, allowing Divakaruni to reinterpret the epic in line with contemporary concerns of gender equality.

Divakaruni also employs myth as psychological realism. The palace of illusions itself symbolizes both empowerment and entrapment, reflecting the contradictions of Draupadi's position. By adapting a canonical epic into a modern novel, Divakaruni demonstrates how myth can be reinvented to critique historical silencing of women's voices.

5. Amish Tripathi: Popular Mythopoeia and Cultural Politics

Amish Tripathi's novels—particularly *The Shiva Trilogy* (2010–13) and *Ram Chandra Series* (2015–)—represent a popular and commercial reworking of Hindu mythology. Unlike Rushdie or Divakaruni, Amish secularizes gods into historical figures, portraying Shiva and Rama as extraordinary humans elevated to divine status through their deeds.

This strategy democratizes myth, making it accessible to modern readers. His language is colloquial, blending contemporary idiom with mythic content. For instance, Shiva drinks bhang and swears like an ordinary warrior, yet his leadership and moral dilemmas elevate him to divine stature. By humanizing gods, Amish bridges the gap between ancient myth and modern readership.

However, Amish's adaptations also reflect cultural politics. Critics argue that his works align with a nationalist desire to reclaim Hindu mythology for contemporary India, sometimes reinforcing traditional moral frameworks. Yet, his enormous popularity demonstrates how myth continues to thrive as mass literature, capable of reaching audiences beyond academic or elite readerships.

Comparative Discussion

Across these five writers, myth emerges as a dynamic paradigm with diverse functions: Rushdie uses myth satirically to question nationhood. Ghosh integrates myth into ecological ethics. Roy invokes fragmented local myths to express trauma. Divakaruni retells epic myth from a feminist perspective. Amish popularizes myth through accessible storytelling. While their strategies differ, all demonstrate that myth is not static but adaptive. It

can destabilize colonial historiography, sustain ecological worldviews, challenge patriarchy, or serve as entertainment. Collectively, these texts show that myth in Indian English literature operates as both a cultural memory and a tool for innovation

Conclusion

This study has examined the role of mythical paradigms in contemporary Indian English literature through the works of Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Amish Tripathi. The analysis demonstrates that myth, far from being a static cultural residue, continues to function as a dynamic narrative force that adapts to the shifting realities of postcolonial India.

Rushdie uses myth as allegory and parody to expose the fragility of national identity; Ghosh situates myth within ecological consciousness, offering alternative epistemologies; Roy reclaims local and fragmented myths to give voice to silenced histories; Divakaruni retells epic myths through a feminist lens, challenging patriarchal grand narratives; and Tripathi democratizes myth for mass readership, translating divine figures into relatable human heroes.

The comparative discussion reveals that myth in Indian English literature is not monolithic but plural, encompassing satire, resistance, ecology, trauma, gender critique, and popular culture. Collectively, these authors illustrate that myth is not a relic of the past but an evolving discourse that mediates between tradition and modernity, history and imagination, politics and culture.

By adapting myths into new contexts, these writers show how narratives once bound to religion or folklore can be repurposed to question authority, reclaim marginalized voices, or forge collective identity. The enduring vitality of myth in Indian English fiction underscores its role as both a cultural archive and a tool for innovation.

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