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## Repression and Resistance: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Reading of Draupadi, Sita, and Ahalya in Indian Epics and Retellings

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### Abstract

This paper examines the representation of Draupadi, Sita, and Ahalya in the Mahabharata and Ramayana through a feminist psychoanalytic lens. These heroines, celebrated as icons of chastity or sacrifice, are simultaneously stripped of erotic subjectivity. Using Freud's concept of repression alongside feminist interventions by Irigaray and Cixous, the paper analyzes how classical epics silence women's desires and how contemporary retellings restore them. Texts by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Pratibha Ray, Volga, Nabaneeta Dev Sen, and Kamala Das reimagine these figures as desiring subjects, challenging patriarchal myths that equate female sexuality with sin or subordination. The study argues that such reinterpretations not only reclaim silenced voices but also resonate with contemporary struggles over women's autonomy in India. This paper situates such retellings within sexuality studies, arguing that they do more than reinterpret myth. They expose how classical texts repressed female erotic subjectivity to maintain patriarchal order, and how feminist rewritings reclaim silenced voices to challenge continuing forms of repression in Indian society—from moral policing to debates around women's autonomy and sexuality.

**Keywords:** Draupadi, Sita, Ahalya, Feminist Psychoanalysis, Repression, Desire

### Introduction

Indian epics are among the most powerful cultural texts shaping collective memory and gender norms. Figures such as Draupadi, Sita, and Ahalya have been revered for centuries, not merely as characters but as models of ideal womanhood. Yet these heroines, while central to the narrative, rarely possess a voice that articulates erotic subjectivity or desire. Instead, their identities are defined through chastity, duty, sacrifice, or punishment. This absence is not accidental but ideological: myths function as instruments of discipline, prescribing roles for women in both domestic and cultural spheres.

The silencing of women's desire in these epics parallels broader patterns of repression in patriarchal societies. As Freud theorized, repression is the cornerstone of civilization: desires deemed threatening to social order are denied, displaced, or punished. In the epics, female sexuality itself becomes threatening and must be contained. The stories of Draupadi, Sita, and Ahalya exemplify how desire is either silenced, erased, or criminalized.

At the same time, feminist retellings of these myths destabilize patriarchal narratives by giving these heroines back their voices. Texts such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*, Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, Nabaneeta Dev Sen's poetry, and Kamala Das's autobiography reimagine these figures as desiring subjects. By restoring the repressed, these works align with what Cixous calls *écriture féminine*—writing that inscribes the female body and voice into cultural discourse.

This paper situates the heroines of Indian epics within a framework of feminist psychoanalytic criticism, reading their silenced desires as sites of repression and resistance. Through this lens, Draupadi, Sita, and Ahalya emerge not as passive icons but as figures whose repression reveals the workings of patriarchy, and whose retellings offer feminist counter-narratives.

### Literature Review

Scholars have long examined how epics shape gender norms in South Asia. Uma Chakravarti emphasizes that myth enforces caste and gender hierarchies by holding women to the

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standard of chastity and obedience (Gendering Caste 35). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously asks, “Can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak 271), a question relevant to epic heroines whose voices of desire are absent in the canonical texts. Kumkum Roy also highlights how epic narratives serve as instruments of social discipline, where women’s bodies are deployed to maintain patriarchal order.

Feminist psychoanalytic critics like Luce Irigaray argue that patriarchal discourse systematically erases female pleasure: “female pleasure has always been denied a language” (This Sex Which Is Not One 77). Hélène Cixous calls for *écriture féminine*, a writing of the female body that resists erasure (“Laugh of the Medusa” 879). Such frameworks illuminate why Draupadi’s attraction to Karna, Sita’s erotic subjectivity, or Ahalya’s desires are silenced in epic texts.

Existing scholarship on retellings of epics has often focused on political, social, or cultural reinterpretations. For instance, Paula Richman’s work on Ramayana traditions shows how local tellings reframe Sita differently across regions. Yet comparatively less scholarship foregrounds female desire as a critical lens for interpreting these heroines. While scholars have explored Draupadi as a figure of humiliation and resilience, or Sita as an icon of chastity, their repressed erotic subjectivities remain underexplored.

This paper addresses that gap. By focusing on the erotic silences of Draupadi, Sita, and Ahalya in the epics, and analyzing their feminist reclamations in contemporary retellings, it contributes to sexuality studies, feminist myth criticism, and postcolonial feminist discourse.

### **Research Methodology: Feminist Psychoanalytic Criticism**

The methodological framework of this study is feminist psychoanalytic criticism, which integrates Freud’s theory of repression with feminist re-readings of desire and subjectivity. Freud argues that civilization demands the repression of instinctual desires, especially sexual ones, which resurface in disguised or pathological forms (Three Essays 45). Applied to myth, this suggests that narratives encode collective anxieties by repressing elements that threaten social order.

**For women, this repression is doubled:** Not only are they subjected to general social prohibitions, but their sexuality is specifically targeted for erasure. Feminist critics such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous highlight how patriarchal discourse silences female desire. Irigaray notes that women’s sexuality is “always described in terms of lack” (This Sex 69), while Cixous calls on women to “write the body” to reclaim silenced pleasure (“Laugh” 881).

By combining Freud’s insights into repression with feminist theory’s insistence on reclaiming women’s voices, this paper adopts a methodology that foregrounds how myths repress female desire and how feminist retellings resist that repression. Draupadi, Sita, and Ahalya will be examined as case studies in repression: each figure embodies a different aspect of how women’s desire is erased or punished. Their feminist retellings will be analyzed as acts of resistance, restoring the repressed and rewriting cultural memory.

Analysis

### **Draupadi: Desire and Repression in the Mahabharata**

Draupadi is perhaps the most complex heroine of the Mahabharata. Married to five husbands, she embodies both desire and duty, yet her own erotic subjectivity remains

unacknowledged. In certain traditions, Draupadi is said to have harbored an unspoken attraction to Karna, her husband Arjuna’s rival. This attraction, however, is never allowed to unfold within the canonical epic. Instead, the narrative silences her longing, preserving her as the epitome of wifely devotion to the Pandavas.

From a Freudian perspective, Draupadi’s attraction to Karna represents repressed desire. The epic suppresses this potential erotic tension, since its acknowledgment would destabilize Draupadi’s role as *pativrata* (devoted wife). Yet repression returns in displaced form: her humiliation during the dice game and attempted disrobing may be read as a symbolic punishment for the threat posed by her desire. Her body becomes the site where patriarchy reasserts control.

Contemporary retellings resist this silencing. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* foregrounds Draupadi’s suppressed attraction to Karna, giving narrative space to a desire repressed in the epic. Pratibha Ray’s *Yajnaseni* similarly allows Draupadi to narrate her inner conflict, reclaiming the voice denied to her in the canonical text. In these retellings, Draupadi is no longer a silent symbol of duty but a woman negotiating longing and loyalty. Through feminist psychoanalytic reading, her repressed desire is restored as a legitimate aspect of her identity.

### **Sita: Chastity and the Erasure of Female Sexuality**

Sita, the central heroine of the Ramayana, is constructed as the paragon of chastity and obedience. Her identity is defined almost entirely through her relationship to Rama. Her abduction by Ravana, though involuntary, subjects her to constant suspicion and demands for proof of purity. The infamous trial by fire dramatizes how a woman’s sexuality must be disciplined, erased, and controlled for social order to remain intact.

**Freud’s notion of repression clarifies this:** Sita’s erotic subjectivity is completely erased to preserve her role as an icon of fidelity. Irigaray’s critique is particularly relevant here: women’s sexuality, she argues, is only recognized in terms of male desire or patriarchal ideals (This Sex 69). Sita is the quintessential example: celebrated for chastity but denied a voice to articulate her own desire.

Feminist retellings contest this erasure. In Volga’s *The Liberation of Sita*, exile becomes a space of freedom rather than punishment. Sita befriends other marginalized women—Ahalya, Surpanakha, Urmila—and learns to value autonomy over enforced chastity. This retelling shifts the narrative from repression to resistance: Sita is no longer the silenced subject of patriarchal morality but an agent of self-discovery. Through Cixous’s framework, Volga’s Sita “writes the body,” inscribing her desires and autonomy into cultural memory.

### **Ahalya: Punishment and the Silenced Body**

Ahalya’s story exemplifies the patriarchal logic of punishing female desire. Deceived by Indra, who approaches her in the guise of her husband, or, in some versions, willingly yielding to him, Ahalya is condemned to lifelessness—turned into stone until Rama redeems her. Regardless of her consent, she is punished, while Indra escapes with comparatively minor consequences. The message is clear: a woman’s desire, even if manipulated, is criminal.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Ahalya represents the most radical repression: her body itself is silenced, petrified, erased from human interaction. As Freud notes, repression does not merely deny desire but seeks to immobilize it, burying it from consciousness (Three Essays 58). Ahalya embodies this burial—her sexuality rendered inert.

Feminist rewritings restore her subjectivity. Nabaneeta Dev Sen's poems reimagine Ahalya as a woman silenced by patriarchy yet yearning for expression. Kamala Das, in *My Story*, aligns herself with figures like Ahalya, refusing shame and affirming desire as central to womanhood. In these texts, Ahalya ceases to be the punished sinner and becomes a symbol of resistance. As Cixous argues, reclaiming the silenced body is a political act; Ahalya's voice in feminist literature exposes the cruelty of myths that equate female sexuality with guilt.

### Discussion

The repression of women's sexuality in the epics is not merely a literary problem—it is a cultural script that persists in contemporary India. The silencing of Draupadi's desire, the idealization of Sita's chastity, and the punishment of Ahalya's passion all establish patterns by which female sexuality is rendered dangerous, shameful, or expendable. These patterns still inform modern debates around women's bodies, morality, and autonomy.

### Moral Policing and the Ideal of Chastity

From bans on "obscene" cinema to attacks on women for "immodest" dress, moral policing in India enforces the same patriarchal anxiety visible in epic narratives. Sita's trial by fire echoes in every instance where women are asked to prove purity—whether through "two-finger tests" in sexual assault cases or social expectations of virginity before marriage. The cultural weight of Sita as *pativrata* legitimizes scrutiny of women's sexuality, making chastity a condition for social acceptance.

### Victim-Blaming and the Legacy of Ahalya

Ahalya's myth embodies a logic that continues to justify victim-blaming in cases of sexual violence. Whether deceived or consenting, she is punished while Indra escapes largely unscathed. The same asymmetry structures contemporary discourse: women are shamed for "inviting" assault, while perpetrators are excused under patriarchy's double standards. As feminist critics note, such myths provide cultural continuity to systemic injustices that criminalize female desire but normalize male entitlement (Roy 92).

Desire, Autonomy, and Contemporary Feminist Movements  
Draupadi's silenced attraction to Karna and her humiliation in the Mahabharata parallel the contradictions women face in asserting desire today. Women's right to choose partners across caste or religion still provokes "honor killings" in many parts of India. Campaigns like Pinjra Tod and Why Loiter? demand women's right to occupy public spaces and express sexuality without surveillance—claims that resonate with Draupadi's longing for autonomy in feminist retellings.

### Retellings as Feminist Interventions

Contemporary retellings by Divakaruni, Ray, Volga, Dev Sen, and Das thus serve not only as literary acts but also as feminist interventions in cultural memory. By making Draupadi, Sita, and Ahalya speak their silenced desires,

these writers disrupt the epic's disciplinary function. They also provide imaginative resources for feminist resistance today. As Cixous suggests, reclaiming the female body through writing is itself a political act ("Laugh" 881). These retellings rewrite the script of silence into one of articulation, making myth an ally rather than an enemy in the struggle for women's autonomy.

### Conclusion

The Indian epics, as cultural texts, have historically repressed female desire, constructing heroines as symbols of chastity, sacrifice, or punishment rather than desiring subjects. Draupadi's attraction to Karna, Sita's potential erotic life, and Ahalya's longing are erased to preserve patriarchal order. Yet contemporary feminist writers reclaim these silences, transforming repression into resistance.

Divakaruni and Ray restore Draupadi as a complex figure torn between longing and duty. Volga liberates Sita from the prison of chastity, framing her exile as autonomy. Dev Sen and Das reimagine Ahalya as a metaphor for silenced but surviving desire. Together, these retellings articulate what Irigaray calls "a language of women's pleasure," breaking the silence of patriarchal texts.

More than reinterpretations, these narratives challenge enduring structures of repression in Indian society, from moral policing to victim-blaming. By reclaiming desire as autonomy, they not only transform myth but also provide cultural tools for feminist struggles today. If the canonical epics disciplined women into silence, feminist rewritings ensure that these heroines speak—not as archetypes of purity or sin, but as women who desire, resist, and reclaim.

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