MODERN STORYTELLING AND ANCIENT MYTHS: FOSTERING EMPATHY AND ETHICS IN INDIAN CHILDREN'S NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

Mythological stories have always held a powerful place in shaping the moral and emotional foundations of a society. In the Indian context, timeless epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, along with the Puranas and Jataka Tales, are not just religious or historical texts they are rich sources of ethical guidance and cultural wisdom. These stories have been passed down through generations, offering lessons in courage, compassion, truth, and justice. In today's complex world, retelling these ancient tales for children has become a meaningful way to nurture emotional intelligence and moral values from a young age. Modern adaptations such as Gita for Children by Roopa Pai, Ramayana for Children by Arshia Sattar, and Mahabharata for Children by Sudha Gupta reimagine these classic narratives in simple, engaging language, tailored to the understanding of young readers. Gupta's version, for example, presents the vast epic in a child-friendly style, complete with vivid illustrations and essential episodes that capture the heart of the story. These books introduce young minds to traditional heroes and dilemmas while gently guiding them through key lessons on empathy, resilience, and integrity. By weaving mythological wisdom into accessible stories, these retellings bridge the gap between past and present. This paper explores how such narratives contribute to children's emotional and moral development, fostering empathy and ethical awareness in a rapidly changing world.

Keywords: Indian Mythology, Children's Literature, Empathy, Moral Development, Mythological Retellings, Teaching Values, Emotional Growth

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian mythology has always been a treasure trove of wisdom, values, and cultural heritage. Stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, and Jataka Tales are not just about gods and heroes but also carry profound lessons on bravery, loyalty, and righteousness. Passed down through generations, these narratives have shaped the moral and cultural understanding of countless children. Classical mythological stories, passed down through generations, tell us about culture, traditions, and ways of life. They shape how we see ourselves as part of a community

and influence our beliefs. However, these stories often include hidden abuse, open violence, gender inequality, and even acts of injustice, such as rapes and murders, which are sometimes presented as acceptable within the context of the myth. When children read these tales, they learn about their culture and values but may also unknowingly absorb these harmful ideas, thinking this is how the world works. While many Indian myths have been rewritten in recent years to address these issues, most of these revised versions are aimed at adults, leaving children without updated, inclusive retellings that reflect better values.

Children's minds are like sponges, absorbing everything they see, hear, and experience around them. Renowned child psychologist Jean Piaget emphasized that children construct their understanding of the world based on their observations and interactions. He explained that their cognitive development is shaped by what they encounter, making stories and narratives a powerful tool for influencing their thought processes. When children listen to or read stories, they don't just enjoy the narrative they internalize the values, morals, and behaviors depicted. For instance, Piaget's theory of moral development highlights how young minds interpret fairness, justice, and ethics from the stories they engage with. Similarly, "Vygotsky's sociocultural theory also suggested that children internalize and learn from the beliefs and attitudes that they witness around them. He believed that culture played an important role in shaping cognitive development and therefore that this development varied across cultures." Lev Vygotsky stressed the importance of cultural tools, like myths and folktales, in shaping a child's social and moral understanding.

In today's world, where empathy, fairness, and equality are valued, it has become essential to reimagine these classical myths for children. Retelling mythology for a modern audience does not mean erasing history but presenting it in a way that resonates with current values. Modern authors are stepping up to this challenge, offering retellings that honor the essence of these tales while discarding harmful biases. Books like Roopa Pai's Gita for Children and Arshia Sattar's Ramayana for Children simplify complex narratives to suit young minds, while also encouraging critical thinking and empathy. These retellings are important because they help children connect with their cultural roots without reinforcing outdated ideas. Stories about characters like Rama or Arjuna are told in a way that highlights their virtues while also inviting readers to question the context of their decisions. They teach children to value justice, kindness, and integrity, providing moral lessons that align with the diverse and inclusive world we aim to build.

Reimagined myths serve as a bridge between tradition and progress, ensuring that the next generation learns the timeless lessons of mythology while embracing modern values. Adapting these stories, we not only preserve our heritage but also create a foundation for children to grow into thoughtful, compassionate individuals.

2. MODERN RETELLINGS: BALANCING TRADITION AND PROGRESS

In today's world, storytelling has evolved to meet the needs of modern readers while still holding on to the values of the past. In particular, the retelling of ancient Indian myths, like those from the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Puranas, has become an important way to introduce children to their rich cultural heritage while making sure the lessons these stories impart are relevant to contemporary society. Traditional myths have been an essential part of Indian culture for centuries, offering moral lessons, spiritual wisdom, and cultural identity. However, as society progresses, some of the values reflected in these stories may no longer align with

modern understandings of fairness, equality, and justice. This is where modern retellings of these ancient tales come into play. They offer a unique balance between tradition and progress, ensuring that children can appreciate their cultural roots while learning about empathy, ethics, and the values that shape the modern world.

3. THE ROLE OF MODERN RETELLINGS IN BALANCING TRADITION AND PROGRESS

Modern retellings of mythological stories for children are a critical tool in balancing tradition with progress. These retellings take the original stories and adapt them in ways that resonate with today's children, ensuring that the central lessons remain intact while addressing contemporary issues like gender equality, emotional intelligence, and social justice. These new versions of old stories preserve the core messages but present them through modern lenses—focusing on the complexity of characters, questioning traditional norms, and challenging outdated societal expectations.

For instance, Arshia Sattar's Ramayana for Children presents the story of Lord Rama and Sita with a modern sensibility. In traditional tellings, Sita is often portrayed as a passive figure who endures suffering quietly. However, in Sattar's retelling, Sita is shown as a more active and self-aware character. Her strength, intelligence, and wisdom are highlighted, allowing young readers to see her as a role model for resilience, self-reliance, and emotional strength.

Similarly, Roopa Pai's Gita for Children simplifies the profound teachings of the Bhagavad Gita for young minds while making sure that its central themes of duty, righteousness, and selflessness are accessible. The Gita's emphasis on ethical decision-making and moral clarity is made relevant for modern children, who are growing up in a world where values like empathy, kindness, and personal responsibility are of immense importance.

In Mahabharata: How It All Began by Sudha Gupta, the story of the Mahabharata is presented in a way that engages children with the complex characters of the epic. The retelling places emphasis not just on the grand battles but also on the emotional struggles of characters like Draupadi, Bhima, and Karna. It highlights their inner conflicts and moral dilemmas, making them more relatable to children. By doing so, Gupta helps children understand that moral decisions often come with complexity, and that there is no simple right or wrong—something that is incredibly valuable in today's world of diverse perspectives.

While modern retellings offer numerous benefits, they also come with challenges. One of the biggest challenges is preserving the cultural and spiritual essence of the stories while adapting them to a more contemporary and inclusive worldview. Many ancient myths are deeply embedded in traditional ideas, some of which are problematic by modern standards. For instance, the caste system, gender roles, and ideas of hierarchy are inherent in many of these stories. When retelling these myths, it's important to navigate these aspects carefully, as they could easily be misinterpreted or oversimplified.

For example, the Ramayana and Mahabharata often depict women in roles that are limited to being obedient wives or daughters. These stories need to be updated in a way that presents women as strong, independent, and active participants in the unfolding of events. This does not mean rewriting the story entirely but rather emphasizing the moral and emotional complexity of female characters like Sita and Draupadi, allowing readers to appreciate their strength and intelligence as much as their virtue and sacrifice.

Another challenge is ensuring that the modern retellings retain the integrity of the original stories. These myths have stood the test of time because they convey universal truths. A successful retelling should not completely discard the traditional lessons but instead update the context and the way these lessons are communicated, ensuring they resonate with today's readers. The stories need to be relatable and engaging, but they must also honor the wisdom of the original epics.

The way children respond to stories depends on the emotional and moral lessons they learn from them. Modern retellings of mythological stories help children understand complex emotions like courage, loyalty, and honor in ways that are relevant to their own lives. They also encourage children to think critically about the world and question outdated ideas. Focusing on empathy, fairness, and justice, these stories teach children that moral dilemmas are not always black and white and that each individual's feelings and experiences matter. For example, children reading about Lord Rama's struggles or Draupadi's courage in the Mahabharata learn that individuals should stand up for what is right, even when faced with overwhelming odds. The lessons of empathy, respect, and moral responsibility, when imparted through these modern retellings, help children develop a strong sense of ethical behavior.

4. THE NEED FOR RETELLING MYTHS: THE INFLUENCE OF VISUAL MEDIA ON CHILDREN'S INTEREST IN BOOKS

In today's fast-paced world, children are increasingly exposed to visual media—television, movies, video games, and digital content. While these mediums offer instant gratification and captivating visuals, they have led to a decline in the interest children have in reading books, especially traditional stories and myths. With this shift, the importance of retelling ancient myths in modern forms has become more crucial than ever. Myths, which were once passed down through generations through oral storytelling and written texts, are now at risk of being forgotten or overlooked by children who prefer the instant entertainment of visual media. Retelling these myths in ways that appeal to modern sensibilities, while still preserving their core values, can reignite children's interest in literature and help them connect to their cultural heritage.

The rise of visual media has dramatically altered the way children consume stories. In the past, children eagerly listened to folktales, mythological stories, and religious epics from family members or teachers. These stories were rich with life lessons, moral values, and cultural knowledge. The Ramayana, Mahabharata, Panchatantra, and various other traditional Indian myths served as tools for moral and emotional education. However, with the growing influence of television shows, animated films, and video games, children are now more likely to engage with characters and stories on screens rather than in books.

Platforms like YouTube, Netflix, and other streaming services offer children a world of visual content that is far more immediate and visually stimulating than a printed book. Animated adaptations of popular stories and characters often with exaggerated, fast-paced visuals are now more accessible than ever. This shift has resulted in children spending more time in front of screens and less time with books. In a world where instant visual stimulation reigns, reading a book demands more focus, patience, and imagination, which many children today may find less appealing.

5. THE DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL STORYTELLING

The decline in interest in books is particularly noticeable when it comes to traditional myths. Stories from the Ramayana or Mahabharata, for example, can feel distant and difficult for children to connect with, especially if they are told in their original, unadapted forms. The language and cultural references may seem outdated to young readers, making it harder for them to appreciate these ancient tales. The rich moral lessons that these stories offer may also seem less relevant in a modern world full of digital distractions.

Children are often captivated by visual media because it presents stories in an easily digestible, engaging manner. Animated movies like The Lion King, Frozen, or superhero films often showcase complex themes in ways that children can quickly grasp. In comparison, a traditional mythological text may require more time to read and interpret, which can feel tedious for young readers. This creates a gap between the rich, cultural stories of the past and the entertainment-driven content of the present. This is where the need for retelling myths comes into play. To engage today's generation of children; these ancient stories need to be adapted into formats that are both accessible and entertaining. Retelling myths in modern ways—whether through graphic novels, animated films, or updated written versions—helps bridge the gap between the traditional and the contemporary. These retellings can maintain the essence of the original tales while making them more engaging for modern children, who are accustomed to fast-paced, visually driven entertainment.

Take the example of Roopa Pai's Gita for Children or Arshia Sattar's Ramayana for Children. These modern retellings use simpler language, vibrant illustrations, and relatable characters to present ancient Indian myths in ways that children can easily understand and enjoy. These retellings also often focus on themes like empathy, emotional intelligence, and social justice, which resonate with today's values. When children are presented with these timeless stories in formats that align with their interests, they are more likely to connect with the deeper meanings of the myths, making them an essential part of their moral and cultural development.

6. CONNECTING WITH CHILDREN THROUGH FAMILIAR MEDIA

Visual media, with its ability to quickly grab attention, has a unique power to draw children in. This is why retellings of myths should not only be available in text form but also in more visual formats, such as animation or illustrated books. A child who might not sit down to read a traditional book about the Mahabharata might be more inclined to watch an animated film based on it. Through vibrant animation or interactive digital content, children can experience the same moral lessons, but in a way that feels familiar and exciting to them.

For instance, the Ramayana has been adapted into various animated series and films. These adaptations take the core message of the story—such as the importance of dharma (duty) and devotionand present it in a visually appealing, digestible format. This allows children to enjoy the adventure and drama of the story while still learning about important values. While the visuals and pacing may differ from traditional storytelling, the essential message remains intact, making it more relevant for the younger generation. Modern retellings also serve to rekindle children's interest in reading books. When children are introduced to a mythological story through an animated film or video game, they are often inspired to read the book or graphic novel version to learn more. The retelling in a modern format can

act as a gateway to the original story. Presenting myths in ways that captivate children's imaginations, these retellings can spark a love for reading and encourage children to explore other forms of literature.

7. CONCLUSION

the need for retelling Indian myths in modern formats is more pressing than ever. With the increasing dominance of visual media, children's engagement with traditional stories has significantly declined. As the world becomes more digital, children are more drawn to fast-paced, visually stimulating content, which has led to a decrease in their interest in books and traditional storytelling. However, through modern retellings, such as graphic novels, animated films, and simplified written versions, these age-old myths can be made engaging, relevant, and accessible to today's young audience. These retellings preserve the core values and cultural lessons embedded in the myths, while simultaneously addressing contemporary sensibilities. Adapting stories like the Ramayana or Mahabharata to modern formats, children not only learn about their cultural heritage but also gain crucial moral lessons in empathy, integrity, and emotional resilience. These adaptations serve as both a bridge to the past and a guide for the future, helping children navigate their emotions and societal challenges.

Ultimately, retelling myths is an essential way to keep these cultural treasures alive, ensuring that the wisdom and values they impart continue to shape future generations. The retelling of these stories is vital in fostering a well-rounded, empathetic, and morally conscious youth.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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