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## Rewriting Childhood through Inclusivity and Innovation: A Study of Mythological Narratives for Children in the works of Sudha Murty and Devdutt Pattanaik

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### Abstract

**Aim:** *The aim of this paper is to explore how Indian myths are reshaped to communicate modern related concerns of inclusivity and innovation. This paper insists that Sudha Murty's method of storytelling fosters inclusivity through the moral sensitivity and empathy through the portrayal of lesser-known figures of mythology, whereas Devdutt Pattanaik's retellings advance interpretive openness, challenging the singular perspective of the mythological stories.*

**Methodology and Approach:** *This paper is qualitative research and an interpretive methodology from the perspective of Demythologization by Rudolf Bultmann. The texts are studied as a narrative and visual concept concerning moral clarity, interpretive openness and cultural preservation through storytelling.*

**Outcome:** *Through this paper, the research has found that the mythological stories, if restructured in accordance with modern context, can be understood in various ways, because there is no single perspective to look at mythology, as it is open for various interpretations, which will definitely help children to think critically and improve their decision-making skills.*

**Conclusion and Suggestions:** *This study concludes that despite holding up with the contrasting approaches, both the writers equally come up with the idea of reinterpreting childhood confrontation with Indian mythology by transforming the earlier narratives as an instrument for ethical and critical development as per the modern perspective of children's literature.*

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Children's literature plays an important role in shaping young minds by transmitting cultural values, imaginative possibilities, and ethical frameworks. In the Indian context, mythical narratives are the foundational texts through which children grow curious about the ideas of morality, social order, identity, and gender roles. However, modern retellings of mythology for children seek to reanalyse these stories through lens of inclusivity and innovation. The recent surge in Indian Children's Literature has seen a transformative shift from rigid, didactic storytelling to nuanced, inclusive narratives. "It is not enough to simply teach children to read; we have to give them something worth reading. Something that will stretch their imaginations—something that will help them make sense of their own lives and encourage them to reach out toward people whose lives are quite different from their own." (Paterson 42).

Children's Literature connects with the mythological narratives by adapting ancient tales into engaging, age-appropriate stories that teach appropriate lessons that teach universal lessons about courage, morality and life's big questions such as good and evil, life and death, through relatable heroes, fantasy, and cultural wisdom, making complex ideas accessible and sparking imagination. Retelling of myths helps in simplifying plots for young readers, by focusing on core themes through modernising the characters. It helps children understand their world, enhance emotional intelligence. Many children's books use mythological subject matter, and reading becomes more rewarding if the reader is familiar with mythical intertexts (Nikolajeva 156). Through mythological retellings, they connect with their cultural heritage as myths provide moral and ethical guidelines with the cultural framework to teach right and wrong. They instil values in every possible interesting way in children by bridging the gap between past and present, making complex stories accessible and encouraging for children; this amalgamation keeps our culture alive and fresh.

This research applies a qualitative methodology that explores innovation and inclusivity in the context of mythology in children's literature. This analysis takes two texts, focusing on its narratives, myths, symbolism, and the philosophical tone restructured into a playful tone for children through the blend of traditionalism and modernity, exploring the various ways to interpret

mythology through their own perspective. The stories in these texts provide a space to critically analyse the different perspectives of the mythos.

Methodologically, this paper focuses on moral clarity, ethical humanism, and emotional accessibilities through the texts *Fun in Devlok Omnibus* and *The Sage with Two Horns* by Devdutt Pattanaik and Sudha Murty respectively. By examining the pedagogical and narrative techniques, and the representations of mythological character, this study reveals how both the authors have interpreted mythology to revalidate the child readership while balancing between tradition and modernity. Demythologization is a concept by Rudolf Bultmann, appeared in 1941 (Congdon). The concept aims to make ancient myths relevant to the modern world. Demythologization does not eliminate myth, instead, it reinterprets it just to fit in the contemporary world for a better understanding of culture and mythology. It restructures the miraculous elements from the writings into critical elements so that myths can be interpreted and understood variedly.

While Sudha Murty focuses on empathy-driven, familial oral traditions, Devdutt Pattanaik utilizes subversive, philosophical approach to dismantle traditional power structures and binaries. *Fun in Devlok* made Gods enter into the world of humans (An Identity Card for Krishna, Shiva plays Dumb Charades, Kama vs Yama) and humans into the world of Gods (Indra finds Happiness). Similarly, *The Sage with Two Horns* bridges the gap between gap between the divine and mundane. In a way, both the authors have humanised the celestials.

Sudha Murty has told the stories from all over India, which introduces young readers to the diverse regional traditions, focusing on the plurality of 'Indian Culture', such as, Coorg (Karnataka), in "The Story of Agastya" and "The Wheel of Time"; Madurai (Tamil Nadu), in "The Girl who wanted the Death Penalty" and "The Hands of Destiny" Kanpur and Neemsar (Uttar Pradesh) in "A Star is Born" and "The Indras who became the Pandavas"; Ujjain (Madhya Pradesh) in "The Fruit of Youth". Sudha Murty has mentioned geographical diversity in her stories, mentioning various cities and states, suggesting that wisdom is not confined to only one place, region or community.

She has consciously focused on the ordinary mortals, instead of talking about Gods and kings. Butcher Dharmavyadha in "A Simple Life" gives an

ethical lesson that “the real way of living life is to do your duty and help others as much as possible” (Murty 113). By calling attention to the virtues of common people, she imparted the kids that spiritual or moral eminence is attainable to everyone irrespective of any social status or physical ability. The story of a sculptor, who carves out a statue even without hands using his voice to instruct other architectures and sculptures in “A Man with no Hands” reflects the determination towards his work and teaches children to be truly dedicated to their work, no matter what the situation is.

By focusing on lesser known or forgotten characters, such as Shunashepa, who was renamed as Devavrata by Sage Vishwamitra; King Rushabhadeva in “The Illusion of life”; Raja Bhartrhari in “The Fruit of Youth”; the story of Senguttuvan, who came to be known as ‘Ilango Adigal’ in “The Hands of Destiny”; Nahusha, who turns into a python because of a curse by Sage Agastya, in “The Intelligent Python”; Dhruv, who was later known as a star named Dhruv, “popularly referred to as Dhruva Nakshatra” (103) in “A Star was Born”; Sage Kaushika, in “A Simple Life”; Rishyashringa, in “The Sage with Two Horns”; and the mention of Singhasana Battisi in “The Disappearing Steps”, Sudha Murty teaches us that good values are not only kept reserved for the heroes of mythology. Moral lessons are embedded organically within the already provided narratives rather than being imposed overtly. In her stories, characters learn through experience, as her approach allows a child to align with the moral concepts naturally. All her narratives remain rooted in tradition; her child centric narrative style reflects her broader approach to mythological retellings for young readers. She has humanised the sage figures, i.e., rather than portraying the sage as an infallible spiritual authority, Sudha Murty presents them with weakness and blind spots. For example, anger of sage Durvasa led him to run for his life was chased by the discus of Lord Vishnu in “The Sudarshana Chakra and the Sage”. The pride of sage Kaushika was brought down by a butcher as he thought that “he had the power to reduce beings to ashes” (110) in “A Simple Life”. In her text, lesser-known characters brought to the foreground. Children act as the passive recipients through her narratives. Though the stories told by her are not the true events from the Indian mythology, but rather, the folktales, written only for the

purpose of instructing children and making them understand complex ethics in much easier way. “This is a folk story and not a real one because the statues of Veluru, Karkala, and Shravanabelagola were actually built by Jain kings in different era.” (Murty 156).

In *The Sage with Two Horns*, the section ‘Guruve Namaha’ instructs through eight stories that everyone should always be respectful towards our teachers. The story “The Boy with Eight Deformities” mentions that a child was born with deformities because of the mispronunciation while reciting the Vedas by his father, Kahoda, and the child in the womb counts them, due to which the child was born with several deformations in his body. “Ashtavakra was born, deformed in eight places- two on his feet, two on his hands, two on his legs, and on his chest and head.” (Murty 12). Despite his deformities, Ashtavakra was intellectually smart and duty bound. Through this story, Murty reflects the idea that one should not stay worried because of their physical disability, instead, one should always focus on his intellectual growth in order to lead a better life. “Ashtavakra was a man of self-realization and Janaka frequently called upon him to debate with him and to learn from him. This conversation between the king and Ashtavakra is documented in what we now call Ashtavakra Gita, or ‘the book of self-realization’.” (Murty 15). Through the story, Sudha Murty has portrayed the character as a figure of humility, wisdom and devotion, despite his physical deformities. This reflects the message that the real greatness lies in self-control, knowledge and virtue, not in physical appearance. He does not allow his deformity to dominate his identity or enfeeble his moral strength, rather, he goes on with his spiritual practices, focusing on the fact that physical differences are a part of human diversity.

Sudha Murty’s writing style is characterised by lucidity, narrative simplicity, and a strong ethical orientation. She deliberately avoids linguistic complexity, and complex philosophical exposition, employing storyline that mirrors oral storytelling traditions. Murty’s refusal to engage in "complex philosophical exposition" allows her to maintain a narrative clarity that mirrors the oral traditions of rural India (Nair 47).

Devdutt Pattanaik's writing style is distinctive for its playful, interpretive, philosophical and dialogic approach to mythology. He looks at mythology as a living and evolving system of symbols and meanings. His style engages young readers. His style allows the readers to question and interpret critically, rather than accepting mythological stories as the one and only absolute truth. Pattanaik's language is conceptually rich. The use of questions, symbols, metaphors and rich imagery guides the young readers towards deeper understanding. He has humanised gods in a different way. He has combined modernity and traditionality. One can see visual and structural innovation in *Fun in Devlok* through illustrations, diagrams and fragmented sections. This multimodal approach enhances accessibility. He instils messages in kids through a non-linear learning approach in his stories, humor and curiosity.

Gods in *Fun in Devlok* experience jealousy, pride, confusion, and doubt. By humanising the divine characters, Pattanaik highlights innovation in mythology. His text deals with the concept of interpretive openness. He provides an imaginative freedom to kids in his text. Children act as the active interpreters through his retellings. He challenges the ideas of singularity in versions of myth. Pattanaik comes up with the idea that myths continue to evolve with the society and can be openly reinterpreted with various perspectives. His texts are the reflections of cultural plurality and human diversity.

In Devdutt Pattanaik's *Fun in Devlok*, Gods enter into the world of children; his stories make mythology approachable, rather than preachy by connecting ancient notion with modern reality. For example, in the story, "Gauri and the Talking Cow", he mentions Gauri's confusion who "was convinced that milk came from packets" (Pattanaik 255). To calm Gauri's curiosity, Pattanaik has innovated a talking cow in his book, so that the kids could relate to what knowledge has been transmitted through the text. He explains it and sways away the confusion through a talking cow to explain the source.

In the story of "An Identity Card for Krishna", the god is pulled aside for a security check at the airport. This incident quickly makes God a human entity so that kids could easily relate. In the story, he is not shown in the traditional attire, i.e., blue skin, yellow dhoti, peacock feather on his head, flute in his hand.

Instead, he is described wearing “a bright yellow T-shirt and faded blue jeans” (Pattanaik 5). Every face needs an identity card. In the story, a picture of ‘humanised’ Ravana is shown, displaying his ten different Id cards for his ten faces (heads). In this world, everybody needs an Id Card, no matter who he is, as Ravana explains, “That’s the rule. One identity card for one head.” (Pattanaik 10). Interestingly, the concept of Id Card is not new the world. In the Ancient times, even Gods had their own identity cards in the form of flags. “Every god had a specific identity card - the dhvaja.” (Pattanaik 45). Garuda Dhvaja, Tada Dhvaja, Vrishabha Dhvaja, Makara Dhvaja. Pattanaik has made an attempt to blend mythology with modernity.

Sudha Murty explains “What”, i.e., the fable and the moral lesson, and Devdutt Pattanaik explains “Why”, i.e., the symbols and its logic. Through the story of “Shiva playing Dumb Charades”, he explains the posture of Nataraj, i.e., the symbol, and explains its significance, i.e., logic behind it. Through the story of “Kama vs Yama”, he explains about the balance of responsibility and desire as a psychological concept, instead of just a moral rule. “First I will finish my homework. Then I will watch television and eat chips” (Pattanaik 251). The tone of stories in *The Sage with Two Horns*, is warm, authoritative, instructional and traditional, that says to just listen and obey. Its setting is majorly ancient forests, gurukuls, and the huge palaces of kings, whereas the tone of *Fun in Devlok*, is playful, inquisitive and contemporary, i.e., God playing games, Gauri asking questions, and the need for identity card for Krishna. The setting of the stories in this book is airport, school premise, garden, children’s bedroom etc. Sudha Murty instils values and heritage through her stories, and Devdutt Pattanaik gives room to critical thinking and logic. Sudha Murty uses stories of King Shibi and Sage Agastya to show sacrifice, humility, compassion and the pursuit of truth. Pattanaik strips away the complexities of mythology. In *Fun in Devlok*, the writer challenges singularity, addressing the notion that there isn’t any ‘single’ right way to perceive the world. He emphasises the fact that the truth is always subjective. His language is conversational. Talking of inclusivity in both the texts, Sudha Murty focuses on social inclusion through narrating the stories of sages, animals, commoners, unusual characters. Devdutt Pattanaik focuses on intellectual

inclusivity through multiple versions and viewpoints of mythology. Devdutt Pattanaik teaches us to value our own perspective also. He allows children to explore in their own way and find answers to their whys. Both the authors offer a polyphonic view of mythology, wherein each and every voice, whether small or unusual, has its own its place. He presents mythology as an extended version of everyday life, rather than a sacred text.

The concept of innovation lies in the usage of dialogues, anecdotes, illustrations, and the art of curiosity in kids. Both the authors move away from fear based moral instructions. He has made an attempt to align Indian mythology with contemporary childhood experiences. Pattanaik's stories are structured around curious questions such as, "Why do you wear male and female earrings?" (78), "How can a god be unhappy?" (100), and many more. Gauri wonders why is the cow considered a sacred entity. She is the most curious child as she keeps on exploring her endless 'whys'. This writing style prompts children to wonder, question, and explore through their own perspective, rather than simply receiving information passively.

The illustrations used in *Fun in Devlok*, are not just the decorative elements but also the experimental anchors through young readers engagingly visualize and interpret the stories in their own way. The icons or pictures serve as a staircase to their imaginary world of fables. Illustrations link narrative content with imaginative imagery. This research demonstrates that in what sense is the Indian mythology considered a foundational framework in children's literature. It is necessary for a child to critically think and analyse through their own perspective, so as to understand the world around them and their role and identity in it. The research presents how myths are placed in children's literature in order to teach kids the values they need to inculcate in their lives. The representation of stories as per the evolving culture sees mythology as a dynamic space, helps young readers to shape their minds in a different way. The stories in both the texts are not just the retellings. They also actively serve to address the ethical, social and emotional needs of a modern kid.

Inclusivity and innovation, both lie in the heart of the narrative techniques of Sudha Murty and Devdutt Pattanaik. Sudha Murty's stories include lesser-

known characters, enhancing the idea that intellectual strength and ethical values are not only meant for the ‘heroes’ they already know. Through her stories, children get to know more about Indian mythology through passively reinterpreting them. Myths here function as ethical guides. In Pattanaik’s stories, children are the active participants and are curious to explore multiple perspectives in their own way. By ‘humanising the celestials’, both the authors taught us that flaws are a part of our life. Therefore, having flaws is not a big deal in the journey of one’s growth of life. The art lies in how one deals with the flaws. One should always work on their flaws and learn from his own mistakes, and keep learning. This is how the circle of life goes on. It gives us a sense of where we may have come from and also provides pathways where we might go in future life (Qureshi). Devdutt Pattanaik’s stories reflect interpretive openness. His stories push a child to question, compare and critically analyse their multiple perspectives of myth. He reinterprets Indian mythology through a sense of plurality and innovation in his narrative technique, which derives the notion that there is no fixed meaning attached to any single myth.

In a contemporary world, most part of the societies are following the concept of nuclear families, due to which the younger generation may lack cultural wisdom, miss out on mentorship, and traditional values passed down by their grandparents. The concept of Demythologization will definitely help the basic understanding of culture and mythology which will further contribute to their inner growth.

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