

Original Article

Preservation and Adaptation: Generational Perceptions of Women in Indian Mythology and Folklore

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Abstract - Myths and folktales are the basis of Indian society, and each region has its own tradition. They are passed down from generation to generation and carry values, represent culture, and propagate social norms. But the portrayal and depiction of women in these stories has always been dubious – sometimes a so-called "ideal" woman, or a victim of numerous archetypes found in today's media. This marginalisation is typically reduced in modern re-imaginings, and female characters are shown to be more nuanced and developed. This study was qualitative, interviewing six individuals from the older generation aged 45+ (3 men and 3 women), and six individuals were interviewed from the younger generation who were aged 16-28 (3 men and 3 women). The interviews were semi-structured. The interviews were audio recorded and then thematically analysed to identify key findings regarding the changes in the portrayal of women in myths and folktales and different generations' perceptions of the same. There were 23 themes and 78 codes across the two tables. Results indicated that nearly all the participants felt the evolving image of women was an improvement from the past and represented newer social values. They agreed that myths and folktales have a significant influence on perceptions of women and thus need to be better represented in an empowering and accurate manner. Participants were particularly interested in the significance of relatable, meaningful, and balanced retellings, able to highlight preservation and adaptation of older narratives. This research finds that this balance is essential in making myths and folktales more accessible, easier to engage with, and culturally empowering while also still facilitating the retention of their historical and cultural essence.

Keywords - Folklore, Mythology, Female Representation, Stereotypes, Gender Differences, Generational Gap.

1. Introduction

India's folklore, mythology, and legends have always been essential in the fabric of its culture and tradition, leading to a complex collection of narratives that have shaped societal expectations and norms. Their nature in creating identities, stereotypes, and various archetypes has led to them being integrated into the heritage of India. Folktales, especially, stand as texts that shape children's perceptions through repeated exposure during early childhood, acting as pivotal parts of their development and influencing their ideals and thoughts extensively (Pelletier & Beatty, 2015; de Brujin, 2019).

In these foundational texts, women often hold key roles, appearing as heroines, goddesses, maternal figures, nurturers, or guardians of the so-called "norm" - embodiments of fertility, sacrifice, and wisdom that sustain the moral fabric of Indian folklore (Burley, 2021; Nisha, 2023). In these texts, women are often portrayed as docile, submissive, and traditional. For example, in the Ramayana, Rama leaves Sita since he prioritise his royal duties over his personal life, bowing to the public opinion that questioned Sita's purity

after being captured by Ravan (Moodley, 2020). Furthermore, in the Mahabharata, the Kauravas disrobe Draupadi to take revenge on the Pandavas and humiliate them (Mandal, 2019). In both these cases, women are mistreated, often due to male influences, powers, or perceptions - remaining pious and calm, yet helpless in these situations. These characterisations of women, quite common in Indian folktales, have long been considered outdated, reflecting patriarchal ideals that no longer align with contemporary understandings of gender.

While male characters often embody power, agency, and heroism, while female characters tend to be defined through ideals of beauty, purity, sacrifice, or desirability, each expressed differently across cultures, a happening that can be attributed to the fact that Indian media has been dominated largely by men. According to Owomaniya (2024), women held only 15% of all Head of Department positions in 2023. Clearly, men may be responsible for reinforcing and reproducing these archetypes. Although there has been an increase in representation from 2022, increasing from 12% to 15%, the disparity illustrates how decisively Indian media has become male-dominated.



Throughout the ages, women have been depicted as docile homemakers, mothers, and wives, commonly tied to the domestic sphere; their roles in public life, economic production, and decision making have often either been ignored or marginalised. They were portrayed as passive figures, dependent on the males in their lives, showing submissiveness, a lack of agency, accepting traditional gender-based hierarchies, contributing to society, and becoming a "good woman" through motherhood or devotion to a man (De Beauvoir, 1949). Conversely, these women's failings also occur due to them failing to meet standards set by the patriarchy. Ahalya's story from the Mahabharata is an example of the above. She was the wife of sage Gautama and was known for her beauty. Lord Indra, the king of the gods, became infatuated with her beauty. Therefore, he took the form of sage Guatam and visited her while the sage was away, ultimately seducing her. When her husband returned and discovered the affair, he cursed both Indra and Ahalya. The most common version of the curse states that Ahalya was turned into a stone, and that she would remain that way until she was redeemed by the touch of Rama's foot. She is eventually freed from her curse during Rama's exile (Ottilingam et al., 2021). It is clear that she was the victim here, tricked by a god with no way to find out the truth; however, she was blamed and punished even when she was not at fault. Ahalya's narrative exemplifies this dynamic: despite being the victim of deception, she is punished and reprimanded for transgressing patriarchal expectations of purity and obedience. The characteristics that make her a "bad woman" are therefore not her own, but rather the result of her failure in being "good" by male-dictated moral rules.

Moreover, women in the media have long been stereotyped as the ideal wife or a damsel in distress, and their diversity in terms of their social and professional roles has been limited. The male gaze is constantly present in the media, objectifying the female body and turning women into objects to be looked at and examined. These portrayals were perpetuated by the male-dominated production and ownership of media, which silenced women's voices and views (Mulvey, 1975). Excessive fidelity to the family was illustrated in films, with ads limiting women to domestic tasks such as washing clothes, cooking, and serving food (Eisend, 2010). In addition, the media tended to focus on sensation and domestic issues rather than on any significant issues concerning women, such as education, violence, or empowerment. They reinforced the ideas of submission, sacrifice, and moral purity, as well as other ideas of patriarchy. The emphasis on so-called feminine virtues occurs not just in folktales or myths and legends, but also in the various kinds of media that individuals are exposed to on a daily basis, eventually impacting their views on women in general.

In fact, these archetypes or certain stereotypes that female characters are built upon can be seen in both Eastern

and Western media. The Western, a popular film, TV, and book genre set in the American West, often fits women into such pre-made molds. A quote by Budd Boetticher, an American director renowned for a series of films including *Seven Men from Now* and *Comanche Station*, sums up the role of women in Westerns quite succinctly: "What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance." (Mulvey, 1989). Westerns have historically confined women to limited archetypal roles, often defining them through moral and sexual binaries such as the virtuous schoolmarm and the saloon girl, portraying a certain binary to their audience (Broughton, 2016). In the movie *Gunslinger in Tucson*, this binary is portrayed extensively, with Lou Crenshaw and Katy Porter embodying the "saloon girl" and virtuous feminine archetypes, respectively (Hansen, 2009). In Eastern media, a similar dichotomy can often be seen, with one woman displaying an obsessive fidelity to family and feminine duties, and the other, often portrayed more negatively, acting as the quintessential "contemporary woman", less interested in family and children and more in building a career. In Indian myths and folktales, characters such as Sita. She exemplifies love and perseverance through her unwavering devotion to Lord Rama and her resilience. Mandakranta Bose (2004) notes that Sita "has emerged as the epitome of wifely devotion and self-sacrifice," while Dhanalakshmi (2013) confirms she is "esteemed as a standard-setter for wifely and womanly virtues. She is revered and respected as a personification of love, devotion, and loyalty, quite similar to the saintly, "pure" woman depicted in Westerns. These stereotypical characters are quite similar, but differ in many ways: while Western media often uses women as foils to each other to indicate the so-called "ideal woman", Eastern Media aims to accelerate the proliferation of this idea through simply portraying these characters as epitomes of femininity and adhering to social standards. This occurs due to the idea that archetypes are historically rooted and have been shaped over centuries by religion, mythology, and social norms. As a result, these archetypes persist and continue to influence narratives even today.

1.1. Women, Tradition, and Narrative Change

As expected, this shift in perspective has led to the way women have been portrayed in modern media to change. The women in these narratives do not match the traditional submissive archetype that has been perpetuated in Indian myths, legends, or older media, but instead, they are strong, rebellious, and central to the tale - no longer existing to simply act as vessels to portray the villain's dismal character, as seen in the Mahabharata, or to exist for the hero to save. Ponnarasi & Sindhu (2024) found that Sita is now portrayed as an "empowered figure, contrasting sharply with her traditional portrayal as passive and submissive." The Liberation of Sita, by Volga, is a novel that portrays this

extensively. Following Sita after she was abandoned by Rama in Ramayana as she embarks on a journey of self Realisation and discovery, the novel depicts multiple women who break away from traditional norms, including husbands, sons, notions of desire, chastity, and beauty. These women assist Sita in coming to her ultimate resolution, ultimately leading to her "liberation" (Kriti, 2024). As seen in the novel, the way women are portrayed in contemporary media and retellings of folktales and epics has changed significantly, and for good reason.

However, the public has mixed reactions to these retellings. They often draw both praise for recontextualizing and adapting classic stories, and criticism for commercialization or misinterpretation. For many, these retellings become powerful symbols, helping fight against the patriarchy and imbibing modern and current values into readers and listeners. But for others, they exist as unnecessary changes to an age-old classic - a violation of the culture and heritage that these tales have stood for since their creation. With regards to the Liberation of Sita, the novel received critical acclaim and praise: being called uplifting, hard-hitting, and empowering, while also focusing on the mistakes of both men and women and characterising and developing even minor characters in the Ramayana, such as Urmila and Supanakha (Volga & Kumar, 2018). But a small percentage of readers feel as if the book presents a misinterpreted and distorted version of the Ramayana, calling it "deeply disappointing" and simply attacking men rather than empowering women.

These reinterpretations change and challenge traditional gender roles in multiple ways, receiving mixed reactions, while also preserving them to a certain degree. Chitra Banerjee Devakarune's novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, is another example that highlights the above. Exploring the events of the Mahabharata through Draupadi's voice - a woman overshadowed in the actual epic and not given much importance - it explores her desires, regrets, and power. She is symbolic of female strength, challenging patriarchal norms, demanding respect, and refusing to be silenced even after humiliation in the Kaurava court. She is portrayed to be fierce, intelligent, emotional, and flawed (Liberty, 2025; Dixit, 2026). Although she is shown to be powerful, defying the archetype she was placed into in the Mahabharata, where her struggles and her story were not given much importance, she still maintains contemporary gender roles and norms. Her identity remains tied to men - despite her strength, her societal position is still defined by her relationships with men, and her destiny revolves around them. She still upholds her duty as a devoted wife by sharing herself among her husbands, standing by them in exile, and supporting their cause in the war - the epitome of a faithful wife (Batra, 2020). These tales do challenge and change gender norms, but in order to have a nuanced portrayal, the earlier values that were imbibed in these women are kept to a certain degree.

Additionally, in this way, these reinterpretations also do not erase culture or heritage to the extent the public may assume. By fusing together the present and the past, they can make these characters three-dimensional and allow their complex characters to be explored while preserving their original portrayal to some degree.

Furthermore, there are examples of such retellings in different cultures. "Circe", a novel by Madeline Miller, reimagines the Greek myth of Circe, who was a powerful sorceress in the *Odyssey*. Her struggles and emotions are explored in immense depth, showing her growth and development both as a character and as a symbol of feminine power and rage (Miller, 2018). Similarly, a few authors also insert non-canonical events into their re-imaginings. Miller herself creates decades of experiences, relationships, and personal development absent from ancient sources. Naomi Novik also expands a short folktale into a complex novel with multiple protagonists and origin events in her novel "Spinning Silver", based on the folktale Rumpelstiltskin (Novik, 2019). Author Anand Neelakantan also adds in similar non-canonical events in his retelling of the Ramayana from the perspective of Ravana and a common asura, adding new events and motivations while also reconstructing the socio-political history of Lanka (Neelakantan, 2012). Through this, authors have been able to add in different narratives and perspectives, with non-canonical events allowing them to explore even deeper and override patriarchal frameworks. Although these events may make narratives less authentic, these re-imaginings often become more powerful through them.

1.2. Feminist Theories

Many theories and frameworks further emphasise the role of myths and folktales in building and enforcing perceptions about women in society. Judith Butler emphasises that gender, rather than being something inherent, is something individuals repeatedly perform based on social expectations (Butler, 1990). Characters such as Sita, Savitri, and Draupadi, therefore, perform culturally sanctioned femininity through obedience, sacrifice, and motherhood, reflecting the typical social expectations of these times. These depictions and performances then become models for later generations as well. Mahmood highlights the importance of agency within constraint—that women may exercise agency through conformity itself. Many feminist retellings may simply dismiss mythological women as passive; however, Mahmood contradicts this, asking if submission itself can be meaningful and a way of resistance, and if agency can exist within tradition (Mahmood, 2025). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) also brings up an interesting perspective. Marginalized women are often spoken for rather than allowed to speak for themselves. These myths and folktales are usually written and narrated by men, and their perspective dominates them. Therefore, based on her theory, women are often portrayed in certain ways due to

the overwhelming male influence and domination over myths and folklore.

Chandra Telpade Mohanty adds the perspective of postcolonial feminism, where she states that Western feminism often portrays "third world women" as universally oppressed (1988). This is especially salient when looking at retellings — do they truly reimagine agency and femininity in specific cultural contexts, or fall victim to the Western depiction and understanding of a truly strong woman in finding an immense need to reimagine female characters to escape this oppression? Sandra Lipsitz Bem (1981) further expands on the gender schema theory, which suggests that stories can teach children about schemas about masculinity and femininity, emphasizing how myths and folklore could form future gender expectations for children. Pierre Bourdieu (2001) also mentions how oppression appears natural because cultural institutions normalise it, seen in the way certain myths and folklore may glorify female sacrifice, obedience, and suffering, making such acts and oppression seem normalised in a society familiar with these narratives.

1.3. Reclaiming and Reshaping Tradition

As society changes and grows, it is important for the media to grow alongside it, including traditional books, myths, and legends. Tales like the Mahabharata and Ramayana are integral parts of Indian society - every child grows up hearing bits and pieces of them, understanding their meanings, values, and morals (de Bruijn, 2017). These narratives imbibed the social values that were essential in their specific time period's contemporary society, and consequently put more emphasis on men being brave, courageous, and noble since they were more dominant and highly represented in society. Now, due to the rise of the gender equality and feminism movement, the need for these stories to include women as main characters is essential, so that children can learn from and identify with them. It is possible that the marginalisation of female characters or the relative absence of them to male characters may implicitly signal to young readers that women should be subservient, compliant, and dependent on men, and that they are not expected to have agency or self-assertion (Williams et al., 1987; Rowe, 1979). Ultimately, these stories are a method of value education to children and teach children to be good, upstanding citizens. These texts, then, must also evolve over time to reflect the definition of a "good citizen" or "good person" as it changes, becoming more aligned with the social norms, beliefs, and standards of today.

Existing studies tend to focus on myths and folklore separately and examine their impact largely from a single cultural or social lens. This research extends the ongoing conversation, however, by examining the narratives (and their modern adaptations) of both the traditional and contemporary worlds. It examines not only the retelling of the stories, but the difference in the perception of these narratives

based on generations, and the conflicts between preserving the story or adapting it while also keeping in mind changing social values.

This paper aims to analyse this very changing narrative of the way women are represented in Indian mythologies and folktales, gradually morphing from the damsel in distress or the childhood best friend to powerful leads who lead armies to battle and fight for themselves and for others. It investigates the way this change has occurred over the years, and how it has mirrored changing perceptions regarding gender and contemporary social norms. Furthermore, it analyses the ways both older and younger generations react to and perceive these changing narratives prevalent in retellings. By situating these myths and folktales within the broader context of India's social, cultural, and personal beliefs, this paper emphasises the importance and relevance of these tales in molding understandings of gender equality, identity, and the evolving roles of women in contemporary society. The following questions will be answered in the course of this research -

- RQ1: What is the perception of older and younger generations on the changing narrative of women's representation in Indian mythologies and folktales over time?
- RQ2: How have folktales and mythological narratives changed over time with respect to their portrayals of women?
- RQ3: What potential influences affect the perceptions of women's representation in Indian mythologies and folklore?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Aim of the Present Study

This paper investigates the relations between traditional myths and folktales, modern social norms, and perceptions of newer re-imaginings with a specific focus on how different generations perceive changes in the portrayal of women in modern adaptations. It aims to collate and analyse existing research, elaborate on missing aspects or gaps, and engage with various perspectives on the portrayal of women in both traditional and modern interpretations. It also looks at the various effects foundational texts like the Ramayana or Mahabharata can have on young people, what changes in characters and narratives may mean for the broader implications and meaning behind these stories.

2.2. Research Design and Analysis

This research incorporates primary data collection through interviews conducted with Indian individuals across different age groups, providing first-hand insight into perceptions surrounding the evolving representation of women in traditional myths and folktales. These interviews

also help reveal whether contemporary perspectives align with or challenge conventional expectations and societal conceptions. Accordingly, this study adopts a qualitative approach, aiming to analyse emerging qualitative trends alongside the broader cultural and literary contexts surrounding these narratives to explore the first-hand lived experiences and understandings of individuals. Thematic analysis was conducted manually following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Interviews were first conducted, and then transcribed. Multiple codes were generated after reading and going through the transcriptions multiple times. Then, similar codes were clubbed under specific themes after revision. It was carried out manually, keeping in mind the small number of respondents, wherein participants' responses were coded and organised into common and meaningful themes. The themes were then described, emphasising the underlying complexities, trends, and insights that emerged.

2.3. Participants

The study was conducted on a sample of 12 participants, who were further divided into the younger generation (16–28 years) and the older generation (45+ years). The younger generation consisted of 6 participants, wherein 3 were men and 3 were women. Similarly, the older generation also consisted of 6 participants, out of which 3 were men, and 3 were women. Out of the younger generation's participants, the majority were students, while most participants from the older generation were working in businesses, with 2 respondents working as housewives at the time of the interviews. Educational levels were also relatively consistent among both generations. Only 4 respondents from the younger generation were currently in high school; all other

respondents had achieved some level of higher education. Participants were recruited through purposive convenience sampling based on age-group criteria and familiarity with Indian myths and folktales.

2.4. Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected through telephonic interviews conducted through phone calls that were audio-recorded for accuracy. These recordings were then transcribed into text, and thematic analysis was conducted on them. All respondents were based in India, with most currently residing in West Bengal, with only two respondents living in Maharashtra.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

To maintain high ethical standards throughout the study, all participants were informed about the aims and nature of the research prior to their involvement. Informed consent was obtained before conducting any interviews, ensuring voluntary participation. Participants were also informed that their responses would remain confidential, and all collected data would be anonymised during analysis and reporting. Explicit permission was also requested to voice-record the interview. Additionally, participants were informed that they were free to ask for clarification or raise any concerns regarding the interview questions at any point during the process, and could choose not to answer any question if they felt uncomfortable. Overall, these ethical measures were implemented to protect participants' privacy and well-being, ensure informed and voluntary participation, and foster a respectful and supportive research environment throughout the study.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Shows the thematic analysis for the younger generation

Themes	Codes	Description of themes
Familiarity with myths and Folktales	Exposure to canonical epics	Respondents were usually exposed to myths like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, alongside stories about festivals and goddesses, with only a few exposed to folktales. Often, these tales were passed down through family elders, reflecting deep emotional connections and bonds.
Traditional Representation of Female Characters	Women as side characters	The theme refers to how women have historically been portrayed to be powerful and strong, yet as side characters in male-centric myths and folktales. They have been used to embody social values and typical virtues associated with femininity, clearing the imbalance in the perception of men and women. Traditional representations often represented women as supporting characters or plot devices, with their roles as wives, mothers, or objects of lust usually emphasised. These representations were deeply rooted in cultural and social norms.
Heading	Character of 'ideal woman'	Values

	Women encompassing cultural values Women are depicted as powerful. Gender imbalance Definition of female virtue Male-centric narratives.	
Changes in the portrayal of women in recent media	Women's independence, autonomy, and strength. Deeper exploration of female characters. Influence of feminism and increased awareness Reflecting change in societal values	Recent portrayals reflect a shift toward more nuanced, autonomous female characters, with "strength" redefined from endurance and sacrifice to agency and decision-making, driven by a changed social perception of gender roles and values. However, while perspectives have evolved, core narrative structures often remain unchanged, creating a tension between reinterpretation and tradition.
Relatability of reimaginings	Reflect modern conflicts and ideas. Encourage questioning of gender roles. Centering women's perspectives	Reimaginings reflect current values by centering women's perspectives and encouraging critical questioning of gender roles. Respondents also found these portrayals more relatable, as they foreground internal conflicts and lived experiences that align with contemporary understandings of identity.
Change in gender roles	Influence of feminist movements. Retellings emphasise women with more agency. Reflecting changing social norms.	Re-imaginings also reflected a change in gender roles and norms, highlighting women with more agency. Respondents also brought up regional variability and cultural practices such as sati to show change in gender roles and expectations over time. However, respondents still stated how change may be limited to private spaces, showing variability in opinion and change.
Educational Value of myths and folktales.	Myths as a form of value education. Values imbibed from foundational texts Shaping perceptions of wanted behaviour Encouraging critical analysis and questioning. Gender identity is affected by narrative exposure.	Myths and folktales act as a form of education, imbibing different values such as independence or strength, and teaching children accepted behaviours in society for women, shaping gender identity. They may also help young people recognise the need for change in gender roles and question them more actively. A respondent also mentioned how cultural contexts may facilitate exploration, indicating education in various fields through myths and folktales.
Influence of local cultural contexts	Defined by time periods. Male defined patriarchal moral and social frameworks. Reflection of social values.	Local cultural contexts shaped traditional portrayals, with respondents linking them to time-specific social values and patriarchal frameworks. These male-defined structures idealised traits like sacrifice, obedience, and devotion while limiting exploration of women's perspectives. At the same time, respondents highlighted a duality, where women were both revered as powerful figures and constrained within socially prescribed roles.
Balance between preservation and adaptation	Preservation of traditional narratives. Preservation of cultural contexts Adaptation to modern contexts.	Respondents emphasised a need for balance between preservation and adaptation of myths and folktales, mentioning the preservation of the original narratives and cultural contexts while still recommending adaptation to modern contexts to increase educational Value. They noted that adaptation enhances relatability and encourages critical engagement, but excessive change risks distorting original meaning.

Intergenerational transfer of knowledge	Storytelling through families.	Respondents highlighted that myths and folktales facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer through oral storytelling within families. This preserves cultural narratives and also reinforces shared values, cultural connection, and behavioural norms.
	Transfer of cultural values.	
Mistreatment of female characters	Suppression and submission of women.	Mistreatment of female characters was a common theme stated by respondents as seen in traditional portrayals. Women within patriarchal frameworks and male-centric narratives were depicted to be submissive and were suppressed through their consistent reliance on men or function as supporting characters. Incidents such as the disrobing of Draupadi or the kidnapping of Sita were often mentioned, depicting direct mistreatment of women in traditional portrayals.
	Patriarchal frameworks	
	Women's reliance on men.	
Deeper exploration of female characters	Women as side characters	Recent portrayals also involve a deeper exploration of female characters. Earlier, they were often depicted as side characters, but contemporary narratives offer more nuanced, realistic, and female-centric portrayals, making re-imaginings more relatable. Respondents noted that this includes greater focus on women's emotions, internal conflicts, and perspectives, which were previously underexplored, them to connect more directly with their experiences.
	Characterisation of women	
	Nuanced, realistic portrayal of women.	
	Female-centric narratives.	

Table 2. Shows the thematic analysis for the older generation

Themes	Codes	Description of themes
Familiarity with myths and Folktales	Exposure to Canonical Epics	Most respondents were more familiar with canonical epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata since they had grown up hearing them, but a few were also familiar with local folktales.
	Exposure to Local folktales	
Traditional Representation of Female Characters	Strong and independent depiction of women.	Traditional portrayals present women as simultaneously strong and virtuous, often idealised as devoted wives, mothers, and supporters, while still being positioned as secondary to male narratives. These representations reflect prevailing social values, reinforcing ideals of duty, sacrifice, and relational identity. Respondents highlighted a contradiction within these portrayals, where women are depicted as strong yet constrained by roles that define them through men or limit their independence. This reveals an underlying tension between symbolic empowerment and structural subordination in traditional narratives.
	Ideal virtues of women	
	Portrayal of the "ideal woman"	
	Women as side characters	
	Reflection of contemporary social values.	
	Women as supporters of men	
Identity defined by men		
Influence of religion on portrayals	Purdah system	Religious and cultural beliefs strongly shaped portrayals of women, with respondents highlighting ideals such as sacrifice, duty, and service as central values embedded in narratives. Women were also elevated through concepts like <i>Shakti</i> and divine feminine power. However, respondents also pointed to how religiously influenced social practices, such as the purdah system, restricted mobility, and limited access to education, reinforcing women's subordination. This reveals a contradiction where religion simultaneously glorifies women while structuring norms that constrain their agency.
Changes in the portrayal of women	Freedom and agency of women	Respondents noted that the portrayal of women in recent media reflected their societal empowerment and showed
	Traditional portrayals still persist.	

in recent media	Reflection of societal empowerment of women	newfound freedom and agency. However, they also noted that this change may not be consistent, and traditional portrayals of women still exist due to the evolution of media and audience approval. Additionally, respondents highlighted that increased access to education, global media, and digital platforms has played a key role in shaping these more progressive representations.
Relatability of reimaginings	Foundational childhood texts	Re-imaginings are easier but also harder to relate to for respondents. Foundational childhood texts communicate universal values and beliefs, aligning with current values as well, increasing reliability due to previous familiarity and acceptability. They provide an intersection and connection between the two generations. However, major changes in social values make reliability difficult due to extremely different lived realities being reflected in folktales.
	Aligning with current values	
	Universal values and beliefs	
	Intersection between generations	
	Difficult due to a major change in social values.	
Changes in Gender Roles	A lack of change in gender roles.	Respondents also stated that re-imaginings both simultaneously challenge and preserve older gender roles, influencing young people's perception of the same. However, respondents also stated that there has been a lack of change in gender roles, suggesting variability in opinions based on personal experiences or thoughts. Additionally, some respondents noted that while attitudes have shifted, underlying expectations such as balancing domestic responsibilities alongside new roles continue to persist.
	Preservation and challenging of older gender roles	
	Influence the perception of gender roles.	
Reflection of Societal Values	Culture defined portrayals.	Re-imaginings were seen as reflections of societal values, with changing social practices and gender roles influencing them. Culture was also identified as a key factor shaping portrayals. Respondents mentioned shifts toward independence, career aspirations, and individual choice, alongside a move away from strictly duty-bound roles, though they noted that these changes coexist with continuing expectations around family responsibility and tradition.
	Changing social practices.	
	Changing gender roles.	
Balance between preservation and adaptation	Need to adapt to current values.	Respondents stated the importance of balancing preservation of traditional narratives with adaptation to current values. They emphasised challenging harmful practices while retaining cultural significance and avoiding loss of original meaning. Additionally, some respondents noted that adaptation should be limited to perspectives rather than core plot elements, as excessive change could reduce authenticity and audience connection to the story.
	Challenging and changing harmful practices.	
	Excessive change leading to loss of original meaning.	
	Preservation of original meaning and values.	
	Cultural Importance	
Influence on the perception of oneself	Perception of gender roles.	Respondents also stated the importance of myths and folktales in influencing one's understanding of self. They shape perceptions of gender roles and lead to the internalisation of values presented in these narratives. They also noted that this influence begins early in childhood and is reinforced through repeated exposure, often normalising specific behaviours and expectations associated with gender.
	Internalization of values.	

Women's empowerment	Role of Education	Respondents emphasised women's empowerment as a key factor in shifting social values, highlighting the role of education and increasing participation in careers. Additionally, they mentioned that this shift is reflected in greater visibility of women in leadership and non-traditional fields, alongside changing aspirations around independence.
	Evolution of women's roles in society.	
	Women in careers and workplaces	
Deeper exploration of female characters	Struggles and feelings of women.	Re-imaginings showed greater depth in characterisation by depicting women's struggles and feelings through women's perspectives. This included a stronger focus on internal conflicts, emotional experiences, and personal viewpoints that were largely absent in traditional narratives.
	Greater depth in characterisation.	
	Women's perspectives.	
Educational Value	Myths as a form of value education	Myths and folktales facilitate intergenerational transfer of knowledge and imbibe values in listeners, encouraging socially correct and normal behaviour in them. Respondents stated that this process occurs largely through repeated storytelling within families, reinforcing these values over time and across generations.
	Intergenerational transfer of knowledge	
	Correct behaviour according to social norms.	

The thematic analysis tables (Table 1 and 2) analysed how both male and female respondents from older and younger generations perceived the presence of women in mythological stores and changing trends, perspectives, and opinions. The two tables collectively generated 23 themes and 78 codes in total.

It was noticed that in a few perspectives and opinions, both younger and older generations shared the same or a similar view. This is evidenced by the theme of "Familiarity with myths and folktales." Two codes emerged - "Exposure to Canonical Epics" and "Exposure to local folktales". Both generations were familiar with the Ramayana and Mahabharata, having heard them during their childhood. All 12 respondents stated familiarity in different degrees, with a respondent from the older generation stating that "*These were told at home by elders, especially in the evenings or during festivals. Many of us heard them*".

Another theme that had similar perspectives from both generations was "Changes in Portrayal of Women in Recent Media." This theme generated 7 codes overall. Participants from the younger generation frequently brought up a depiction of women's independence, autonomy, and strength. One respondent stated how the character of Sita was given "*more voice and more agency,*" through her questioning Rama and refusing the Agnpariksha she was forced to go through to prove her purity and virginity. Participants pointed out that recent portrayals provide more nuanced and complex depictions of female characters, making them more authentic and realistic. This change could be sparked due to feminist movements and evolving social values, which have led to reinterpretations of traditional characters in ways that reflect modern views on gender equality. However, others felt that many modern portrayals remained surface-level or tokenistic,

continuing to depict women in secondary or subservient roles without challenging public perceptions. The older generation stated that reimagining reflects the empowerment of women while emphasizing their freedom and agency. A respondent noted how "*Women are now portrayed as educated, independent, and ambitious individuals. Their aspirations and personalities are given more depth compared to earlier portrayals*". However, a few respondents felt that traditional portrayals still largely remain unchanged, as historical stories and characters continue to be represented in similar ways. At the same time, respondents generally agreed that newer portrayals are influenced by evolving social and community values, changing social norms and gender roles, with greater education, employment, and empowerment of women playing a significant role in this.

Additionally, a theme that overlapped between the two generations was "Relatability of re-imaginings", which generated 8 codes. The younger generation mentioned how re-imaginings reflect modern conflicts and ideas whilst centering women's perspectives, increasing relatability. Multiple respondents mentioned how, by reflecting current conflicts, re-imaginings felt more relatable. They stated that they "*tend to connect more with characters who reflect those ideas*" and are more meaningful to "*our generation because we focus more on equality and empowerment*". A respondent noted that re-imaginings can connect cultural pride with contemporary identity, strengthening cultural rootedness. Respondents also felt that such reinterpretations encourage critical thinking about social practices and gender roles, making these stories more relatable and personally meaningful. Respondents from the older generation also shared similar views, but in different contexts. They stated how they had grown up hearing these stories. Furthermore, a respondent mentioned how these stories communicated

universal values and beliefs, making them relatable "no matter how much time passes". Respondents noted that re-imaginings align with contemporary values, helping bridge generational perspectives. However, one respondent felt that rapid social change can also make certain adaptations harder to relate to, particularly regarding shifting attitudes toward traditions such as marriage.

Both generations also agreed on the theme "Educational Value". This theme generated 8 codes in total. The younger generation noted how myths and folktales acted as a form of value education, imbibing essential and expected values in young people, shaping perceptions of behaviour wanted or expected in society. A respondent noted, "*these stories quietly teach what is considered good or shameful behavior for different genders.*" Respondents highlighted that these stories can encourage critical thinking, awareness, and a more balanced understanding of gender roles, suggesting that narrative exposure may influence gender identity and perceptions. They also emphasized the role of myths and folktales in preserving culture and passing down cultural contexts across generations. The older generation's respondents also shared a similar experience and understanding of myths and folklore in acting as a form of education. They mentioned how myths could act as a form of value education. A respondent noted that "*Young people can learn many values from them if they follow the lessons.*" Another respondent mentioned that young people often internalize the values presented in stories. Respondents also emphasized their role in transferring cultural knowledge across generations and shaping perceptions of acceptable behaviour in society.

Another theme that overlapped was "Changes in gender roles", generating 6 codes overall. The younger generation's respondents stated how re-imaginings reflect changing social norms due to the influence of recent feminist movements. Respondents stated how the shift in gender roles portrayed in myths and folktales "*challenges the idea that women must always be self-sacrificing or obedient.*" A respondent stated that feminist retellings can encourage people to question unfair norms and imagine alternative forms of relationships, leadership, and family structures. However, others felt that gender roles have not changed significantly, arguing that women still face many of the same issues and that traditional norms continue to be reinforced. This contrasted with the views of respondents who believed that portrayals of gender roles have shifted considerably in recent years. Respondents from the older generation brought up how there had been a lack of change in gender roles, simultaneously preserving and challenging older and more traditional gender roles. A respondent also further described how some parts of the myths and folktales "*challenge traditional roles, especially in how women speak and act. But the basic story and values are mostly kept the same.*" A respondent noted that although myths and folktales increasingly challenge traditional gender

roles, this change is uneven across different sections of society and remains incomplete. As a result, both older and younger generations shared overlapping views on changing gender roles and their connection to traditional and modern portrayals of these stories.

Both generations further shared similar ideas about the necessity of "Balance between preservation and adaptation" as a theme, with it generating 8 codes in total. Respondents from the younger generation mentioned how the preservation of traditional narrative and cultural contexts was important, but adapting to modern ideas and perceptions was also important, helping increase educational Value. They mentioned that adaptation could assist in increasing engagement with the myths and folktales and making them more accessible. Respondents emphasized that, as society and values evolve, traditional tales should adapt to modern contexts as well. Most respondents emphasized balancing authenticity with reinterpretation by preserving the core of these stories while adapting female characters and their roles. They also noted that traditional versions help examine historical ideas of gender and power, while modern retellings promote inclusivity and gender equality. The older generation also shared similar beliefs. Respondents stated the importance of a "*healthy mix*" between adaptation and preservation, mentioning that "*if the characters are changed too much, the originality is lost.*" They noted how the "good qualities, values and morals" conveyed through myths and folktales should be preserved, but adapting to the needs and contents of the modern world and new generations. Respondents noted that adaptation can help challenge harmful traditions and outdated gender expectations, while still preserving the core meanings and cultural values of these stories. Both older and younger respondents largely agreed that narratives should reflect contemporary realities for women without losing their original ethical and cultural foundations.

A theme which also showed an overlap was "Deeper exploration of female characters". Younger respondents brought up issues such as the depiction of women as side or supporting characters, reflecting on how, in recent portrayals, more characterisation of women has led to more nuanced and realistic portrayals in female-centric narratives. Respondents noted that this included putting a greater focus on women's emotions, conflicts, and perspectives. A respondent noted that women in traditional narratives were often portrayed without much exploration of their thoughts or perspectives. Respondents felt that newer retellings give female characters greater strength, emotional depth, and independence, allowing for more personal and nuanced portrayals. The older generation also had similar ideas and experiences, noting how there is more emphasis given to the struggles and feelings of women by exploring internal conflicts, giving greater depth in characterisation, and bringing to light personal viewpoints that were largely absent in traditional narratives. A

respondent stated that *"Women are now portrayed as educated, independent, and ambitious individuals. Their aspirations and personalities are given more depth compared to earlier portrayals"*. Another respondent noted that female characters in reimaginings are portrayed as more independent, vocal, and willing to question decisions, reflecting greater agency. Respondents also highlighted that these retellings explore women's struggles in more depth, leading to more detailed and comprehensive portrayals.

The older and younger generations both had similar views on the themes of "Reflection of Societal Values" and "Influence of local cultural contexts", generating 6 codes. Respondents from the younger generation emphasised how traditional portrayals of women were defined by the time periods these stories were written in, stating that *"the difference could also be influenced by the time periods in which these epics are set."* They further detailed how these portrayals may reflect contemporary social values due to predominantly male-defined and patriarchal moral and social frameworks. Respondents noted that male-dominated social structures often idealised traits such as sacrifice, obedience, and devotion, linking these stories closely to traditional values. They also highlighted how patriarchal norms surrounding purity, family honour, and respect for authority reflect the strong influence of cultural contexts and social expectations within these narratives. The older generation's respondents mentioned that culture often defined traditional portrayals of women, reflecting changing social practices and gender roles. Respondents mentioned shifts towards more independent women by pursuing careers and individual choice and gaining education, moving away from mainly duty-bound roles. A respondent also mentioned how *"if the local cultural system values and cherishes women's power and empowerment, the same thing would be depicted in mythological tales"*, bringing up examples of a "Devi" and a "Shakti" archetype typically seen in traditional portrayals of women. Another respondent also further stated that *"There was limited access to education for women, which reinforced the idea that women were the 'weaker sex' or subordinate to men"*, emphasising the above. However, there was a mixed perception by some respondents - they also mentioned how these changes in the portrayal and representation of women may coexist with continuing expectations about family responsibilities, duties, and traditions.

Another theme that was common was "Traditional Representation of Women", which generated 14 codes in total. This theme had somewhat mixed perspectives from respondents from older and younger generations. Respondents from the younger generation specified how women were viewed as side characters, with the character of the 'ideal woman' being portrayed throughout various narratives, often being used to mirror various cultural and social values. A few respondents noted that male-centric myths and folktales often imposed rigid definitions of female

virtue, reflecting significant gender imbalance. Views on women's portrayals were mixed: some respondents felt women were depicted as strong and autonomous, while others believed they were shown as weak or subservient. One respondent noted that women are portrayed as *"in charge of their own bodies and their own autonomy"* while also embodying more vulnerable roles, such as daughters and wives. Another highlighted the dichotomy in portrayals of figures like Kali and Durga, who are revered as powerful warriors yet also viewed as disruptive or dangerous, reflecting both reverence and control in the representation of women. Contrastingly, respondents from older generations usually stated that women were shown to be strong and possessing agency to a greater degree than what the younger generation believed, with one respondent stating that *"the female characters were depicted in a very, very strong and independent manner" and that all these stories were "driven by women."* One respondent also stated that female characters *"were ideal wives, ideal queens, ideal mothers."* Others also stated that sacrifice was used as a way to show strength. Their strength or independence was often defined through virtues such as patience, devotion, or loyalty - ideal virtues usually reflecting contemporary social values. However, others disagreed with this perspective, stating that female representation in traditional narratives was limited and often overshadowed by male characters. Respondents noted that women were frequently portrayed as dependent figures whose identity and purpose were tied to their husbands. Overall, while both groups shared similar understandings of traditional portrayals, differing views on women's strength and empowerment reflected shifting and divided opinions.

There were also a few themes that did not overlap between the two groups. Respondents from the younger generation mentioned how myths and folktales lead to an "Intergenerational transfer of knowledge", a theme that generated two codes. Respondents mentioned how they grew up hearing these stories in their families through oral storytelling. One stated, *"Those were the stories my mother always shared with me"*. Furthermore, they showed how this acted as a method to transfer cultural values and norms, with a respondent stating that these stories were *"not just for entertainment, but also a way of passing down cultural values and ideas"*. Another also emphasized how *"these stories are strongly associated with traditional values"* and that they "grew up" with these stories.

An additional theme seen in the interviews of the younger generation was the "Mistreatment of female characters", generating 3 codes. Many respondents noted the suppression and submission of women through their constant reliance on men, facilitated through patriarchal frameworks. Events such as the disrobing of Draupadi or the kidnapping of Sita, alongside the Agnpariksha she was forced to undergo, were mentioned by respondents, shadowing direct instances of the mistreatment of women in traditional portrayals, with

this very mistreatment being used as a catalyst for larger conflicts or events to take place. They also talked about practices such as sati, influencing these narratives, and clearly showing how traditional myths and folktales show the mistreatment of women in different ways.

A theme established by respondents from the older generation was the "Influence of religion on portrayals", generating one code. Respondents stated that religious and cultural beliefs strongly shaped the portrayals of women. They mentioned how the purdah system may have restricted the mobility of women and painted them in a subordinate light. Contrastingly, other ideas such as the empowerment of women through religion were also brought up, with concepts like Shakti and divine feminine power mentioned by respondents. This shows a duality where religion glorifies and empowers women while also establishing structural and societal norms that constrain their agency, independence, and autonomy.

Another theme seen in the older generation was "Women's empowerment", generating 3 codes. Respondents mentioned how, in modern times, there had been an increase in the empowerment and agency of women due to increased education and freedom in choosing and pursuing a career, stating how women are able to enter fields such as *"the military, education, law, and administration"*, giving them *"more opportunities to develop their identities"*. Respondents viewed newer portrayals of women as a natural result of women's empowerment and the evolution of gender roles in society, reflected in the thousands of women working in non-traditional fields and challenging traditional views surrounding independence and femininity.

Furthermore, another theme discussed by respondents from the older generation was myths and folktales "influence on perception of oneself", generating two codes. They stated the importance of these tales in shaping one's understanding of self, defining perceptions of gender roles and internalising the values presented in them, urging and motivating individuals to adopt them into their lives as well. Respondents also further noted how this influence on the perception of oneself begins from a young age and is reinforced as individuals are exposed to these tales repeatedly, normalising specific behaviors, expectations, and norms associated with gender. A respondent also stated how *"society reinforces gender roles through everyday symbols"* and *'stories are a part of this larger system of influence'*.

Media exposure and education can also play a part in influencing respondents' perspectives and perceptions. Individuals from the younger generation were more active participants in making use of and engaging with social media. They were also more familiar with contemporary retellings and rewrites, being able to associate with and reference them more comfortably. Respondents from the older generation

were usually not that familiar with social media or modern retellings. However, most respondents had similar levels of education, with all adults having at least a college degree, except the high-school students.

4. Discussion

The role of women in Indian society has always been somewhat fraught. Women have typically been marginalized and given an inferior position in both familiar and social dynamics. Having been forced to face injustice, suppression, oppression, subjugation, and exploitation in various contexts in a male-dominated society, women have been reduced to lower statuses, treated as commodities, and objectified (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; hooks, 2015). However, the role of women has changed as contemporary values and beliefs have changed. Das and Dhalayat (2013) highlighted how the role of women in Indian society has evolved from traditional roles to becoming bread earners, with a shift towards a new era of freedom and rights, despite historical discrimination and a double standard in societal treatment. UN Women (2025) also emphasises how women still continue to face persistent oppression and exploitation, with their discrimination and humiliation still continuing today. Therefore, myths and folktales may act as important conduits to challenge these beliefs and incite change, questioning the gender roles imposed on women even today.

The growth of the media has had a significant influence on how women are depicted, changing social perceptions and views as well. The media has the power to amplify the voices of women and bring attention to gender inequalities, acting as a source of inspiration and empowerment for all women engaging with that media. Contrastingly, the media can also act as a method to perpetuate damaging stereotypes about women and further suppress and objectify them (Gaur et al, 2024). Therefore, the media can have both positive and negative contributions to the overall societal perceptions of women. Patowary (2014) highlights how media may increase patriarchal thought processes by reflecting male dominance, potentially reinforcing stereotypes of women being inferior or submissive, thus attracting critique from various feminist thinkers. This is corroborated by Rao (2014), who mentions the coverage of sensationalised sexual violence in the media, often being viewed as a highly marketable commodity. This objectification and commodification of women could perpetuate more gender based discrimination. The media may, consequently, act as a double-edged sword, increasing the marginalisation of women or challenging gender biases and outdated thoughts and ideas by providing more balanced, nuanced, and modern perspectives. However, the media may also act as a tool for empowerment. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), provides Draupadi agency and independence through its characterization of her. Gaur and Kashyap (2024) explore the feminist narratives and influences present in this tale, where Draupadi is portrayed as a complex, nuanced, and

independent woman who challenges traditional gender roles and social expectations. She is given a voice, with her strength and agency being emphasized. This contradicts her usual depiction as a passive figure in the traditional version of the Mahabharata. Through this, Brunda and Shetty highlight how recent media can be used to reinterpret ancient narratives to bring attention to women's resilience, autonomy, and inner struggles. Feminist reimaginings of myths and folktales are also essential since they continue to be an important but contested part of cultural systems (Luthra, 2014).

This study found that individuals believe that traditional myths and folktales should preserve the original narratives and premise while still adapting to modern contexts to increase relatability and educational Value. This is supported by previous research. Oliveira (2024) found that although the retailers differed in style, they all portrayed an ancient pre-colonial India through the lens of modern neoliberal ideals such as individual choice and social mobility. Women in these tales are usually empowered, possessing autonomy and independence. In Divakaruni's 2019 novel, *Forest of Enchantments*, Sita's intelligence is emphasized. She thinks individually, empathetically, and is able to make decisions for herself. However, this portrayal goes against the typical perception observed in this study's respondents. Sita was unable to counter the patriarchy, having to play along with it and being forced to act passively, even though she was given some degree of autonomy, even though readers know the reasoning for her inaction (Oliveira, 2024). Through this, Divakarunee establishes a newer portrayal of Sita—one where her thoughts and reasoning align with a more modern interpretation of gender roles, but she still remains bounded by the systems of the time, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how the expansive effects of the patriarchy carry over in various settings and contexts. Puja and Nair (2026) further highlight how Surpanakha, an antagonist from the Ramayana, is reconfigured, turned into a compelling character with her own aspirations and agency. They attempt to free her from typical patriarchal constraints, depicting her emotional depth and changing her brutal fate, consequently challenging traditional narratives that detail a one-sided, unidimensional portrayal of her and so-called "villainous" women in general. They also emphasised how myths "can be retold to challenge patriarchal norms," driving cultural change and revealing the importance of these retellings in preserving traditional contexts but also adapting to contemporary ideals to increase social and cultural changes, growth, and developments.

This study also found that myths and folktales acted as ways to educate young people and facilitate the intergenerational transfer of knowledge. Previous research indicates that folktales do increase cultural participation, helping people engage with diverse experiences and knowledge. Folktales are often considered intercultural tools

to introduce pupils to various literary, social, and cultural heritages as well. Scholars have also observed that folktales act as a source of knowledge, teaching students about socio-cultural norms, costumes, values, and worldviews (de Bruijn, 2017). Additionally, myths and folktales can assist in passing down moral lessons and societal values, teaching young people about morality, empathy, respect, and cooperation while simultaneously assisting children in differentiating virtues from vices. They internalize the values portrayed in these stories, with folktales acting as apt educational tools in culture (Medda, 2025). According to Thorne-Thompson (1903), fairytales, which usually fall under the umbrella of folktales, offer subtle glimpses into the laws and norms governing daily life and encourage effective and nuanced interpretations of one's thoughts. They assist in offering a varied perspective of the world and influence one's actions and behaviour. The novel "The Power of Oral Culture in Education" further exemplifies the above, stating the transference of embedded life lessons (Eizadirad & Wane, 2023).

Another finding of this study was that most respondents found differing portrayals of women in the same myths or traditions, with some viewing traditional portrayals to be empowering and strong, while others found them flawed and disempowering. This may have occurred due to individuals engaging with different versions of the texts. A.K. Ramanujan (1991) emphasised how there may be an uncountable number of Ramayanas, defined by the various languages they have been written in, including Gujarati, Javanese, Kannada, Tamil, Thai, and Laotian, resulting in varying narratives or tellings. He indicated major differences between Valmiki and Kampan's versions, suggesting that the portrayal of women in these tales may be determined by the specific regional cultural contexts, time periods, and authors by which they have been written. Chatterji (1988) emphasised how women are often depicted to be wild, independent, irreverent, and strong. But simultaneously, they may still be depicted to be subservient to or dominated by men, or greedy and foolish, often being motivated by materialistic goals. Janickyj et. al. (2024) also found variability in female representation across mythologies, with some narratives prioritizing female characters more than others, supporting the idea that the representation of women is extremely varied, not just in Indian culture, but throughout myths and folktales across cultures and regions. Furthermore, this contradictory portrayal of women in folktales has also been observed by other researchers in other cultures. Chingiz (2024) found that many Turkish folktales may perpetuate patriarchal stereotypes and reinforce traditional gender hierarchies and roles, with women being portrayed as passive, submissive, and dependent on men for protection, guidance, and direction. She also noted the image of the various character archetypes women are often forced into, the "faithful wife" and "devoted mother", reflecting societal expectations of women's roles and duties. However, another

side to folktales is that they also depict powerful, intelligent, capable women who defy the norm and take control of their own fate. This helps to challenge general patriarchal views and models and bring about other perceptions of femininity.

This research makes an important contribution by highlighting how much earlier learning and exposure shape people's understanding of myths and folktales. It also reveals the complexity and nuance of the stories and narratives that continue to influence Indian society today. While previous studies have mainly focused on how women are portrayed in traditional folktales, this study broadens the discussion by also examining the role and impact of modern retellings and adaptations. In doing so, it places Value on individuals' personal experiences, interpretations, and beliefs.

As an original qualitative study, it directly engages with people who have grown up hearing these myths and folktales. The findings are grounded in their lived experiences and suggest the need for a balanced approach—one that neither rejects traditional narratives outright nor completely changes them. Instead, the study highlights the importance of both preservation and adaptation.

A key finding was the widespread belief that change is necessary. Most participants felt that myths and folktales should evolve with time, while still retaining their cultural and educational significance. Respondents explained that modern retellings can make these stories more relatable and meaningful, particularly by giving greater attention to perspectives that have historically been overlooked. Such adaptations can encourage deeper engagement with traditional narratives while helping them remain relevant to contemporary audiences.

Ultimately, this study seeks to identify the middle ground between modern feminist values and traditional storytelling, finding a space where cultural heritage can be preserved while ideas of representation, agency, and relevance continue to evolve through the reimagining of myths and folktales.

5. Conclusion

Myths and folktales, as this study shows, are not just any stories that children grow up hearing. They are foundational texts, imbuing specific values and understandings in young people while acting as methods to preserve culture and heritage. Individuals found conflicting portrayals of women in traditional narratives, often being depicted as side characters in male-dominated stories, used as platforms to proliferate specific values that were considered desirable in women. Other narratives also focused on a strong and independent depiction of women in folktales. There has been a significant change in the narrative of women in myths and folktales. Their independence, autonomy, and strength were now emphasised primarily due to the influence of feminism,

increased societal awareness, and changing contemporary values and beliefs regarding gender. However, traditional portrayals still persist to a degree, suggesting that there may still be scope for further empowerment of women in certain narratives. Older and younger generations also had surprisingly similar beliefs about these newer portrayals, often going against the typical expectation that older individuals would be more staunch in their beliefs and would connect with older portrayals more strongly. They, too, agreed on the importance for balance between preservation and adaptation in newer narratives, perceiving these changes to be a positive development supporting the empowerment of women.

The future of myths and folktales lies in this very balance. By finding ways to make these age-old stories more relatable and meaningful to younger people today as they slowly distance themselves from aspects of their culture they consider undesirable or backward, these tales remain relevant. The recent increase in adaptations only reflects the above. As perceptions shift across older and younger generations, it becomes increasingly important to approach reinterpretations with sensitivity to both tradition and contemporary social values. Retellings that thoughtfully reimagine female characters without entirely discarding the cultural essence of the original stories can help make these narratives more relatable and meaningful to modern audiences. By finding common ground between heritage and progress, storytellers can ensure that folktales continue to survive not as static relics of the past but as living narratives capable of adapting to the needs, perspectives, and realities of each new generation.

5.1. Limitations of the Study

- 1) Homogeneity in socioeconomic and geographical background: Study participants were mainly from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Most respondents also resided in Kolkata. This may have influenced their responses as they may have had similar experiences and labels of exposure to myths and folktales. This also limits the generalisability of these findings across individuals from different regions, cultures, or financial means.
- 2) Research Design: The study was mainly carried out based on qualitative data. Using a mixed-methods design using surveys or questionnaires could have contributed quantitative information that could have made the researcher's design.
- 3) Thematic Analysis: Thematic analysis was carried out manually. Using software could have made this process more efficient and ensured no themes or codes were left unanalysed.
- 4) Sample Size: The sample size was low, limiting the range of viewpoints that could be analysed and reducing generalisability.
- 5) Exclusion of regional myths and folktales: The study mainly focused on pan-indian myths and folktales such

as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, excluding regional folktales. This omitted the portrayals shown in those narratives.

5.2. Future Recommendations

- 1) There should be future research exploring various cultural myths and folktales, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the representation and portrayal of women across different states and cities in India. This could add more diverse perspectives and increase the study's generalisability. A cross-country or cross-cultural comparison of these narratives could also be done.
- 2) Widening the sample size by interviewing more people from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds could provide more representative and diverse views. Larger sample sizes could further make the information analysed more reliable and extensive.
- 3) The balance between preservation and adaptation could be maintained in recent retellings, offering a nuanced, complex portrayal of women while still preserving traditional plotlines, events, and conflicts. Authors should focus on creating such comprehensive narratives, increasing the educational Value of myths and folktales, their prominence in popular culture, and still remain relevant and relatable in contemporary society. Such changes would, in fact, help individuals of both older and younger generations view these tales in a new light, facilitating questioning of gender roles, social norms, and stereotypes.
- 4) Policymakers and cultural institutions could further encourage inclusive adaptations of traditional folktales through educational curricula, literary initiatives, and public storytelling platforms that amplify diverse perspectives. Supporting contemporary reinterpretations that balance cultural preservation with social relevance can help foster greater representation, critical engagement, and accessibility for younger audiences.
- 5) Readers and creators engaging with traditional narratives should approach traditional folktales with both cultural sensitivity and critical openness, recognising the Value of preserving heritage while also allowing space for reinterpretation and inclusivity. Encouraging dialogue around these adaptations can help ensure that folktales remain meaningful and relevant across generations.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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