



Research article

Keeping Myth Memory Alive: The Usual and the Unusual in Sudha Murty's *Unusual Tales* Series

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Abstract

If myth is vital to a community, its memory must be kept alive. But how, is the question? Is it always prudent to remain faithful to the 'original' version of the received myth, or is it desirable to tamper with, or destabilize, the source myth? In India, mainstream versions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have long been disrupted by folk, feminist, and queer adaptations. Reversions of these oral, transhistorical master narratives of Hinduism have made a resurgence in a post-independence India that is precariously perched between tradition and modernity, and hence more acutely desirous that its children veer closer to their roots, or so the flourishing market for myth retellings for children suggests. Amongst this incandescent body of literature is Sudha Murty's series of five books that revisits popular stories about the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon — *The Serpent's Revenge: Unusual Tales from the Mahabharata* (2016), *The Man from the Egg: Unusual Tales about the Trinity* (2017), *The Upside Down King: Unusual Tales about Rama and Krishna* (2018), *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree: Unusual Tales about Women in Mythology* (2019), and *The Sage with Two Horns: Unusual Tales from Mythology* (2021). This paper explores how these tales of antiquity, refracted and reconstructed through the author's own personal memory, intersect with the more public and collective myth memory of the community. In reviewing Murty's retrieval of myths by reimagining and re-situating the 'evidentiary traces' of myth in the here and now for the children of today, it interrogates how, if at all, the retold myths counter the metanarratives of gender, religion, culture and perhaps, history too. Finally, it argues that the genre of myth retelling must go beyond simply reviving myth memory to destabilizing myth by 'fiddling' with the sacred, especially when adapted for children.

Keywords: destabilization, evidentiary traces, myth memory, myth retelling



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Introduction

Childhood is incomplete without fairytales, folktales, and myth—or so adults like to believe. Of the three, myth is often accorded the greater privilege. Indian children's literature has to its credit a suitably large body of writing dedicated to retelling myths for children, and adaptations of the two ancient Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are the most favored. The focus of this paper is the *Unusual Tales* series by Sudha Murty, whose works for children are some of the most popular in Indian children's literature in English. The five books that constitute the series— *The Serpent's Revenge: Unusual Tales from the Mahabharata* (2016), *The Man from the Egg. Unusual Tales about the Trinity* (2017), *The Upside Down King. Unusual Tales about Rama and Krishna* (2018), *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree. Unusual Tales about Women in Mythology* (2019) and *The Sage with Two Horns: Unusual Tales from Mythology* (2021)—recount tales of antiquity reconstructed at the intersection of the author's personal memory and the more public and collective myth memory of the community. This paper sets before itself the task of examining what renders *Unusual Tales* unusual. It begins with a discussion on the dissensions about the originality of the 'ur-version' chosen for reinterpretation by the myth reteller. It then draws upon insights from the field of memory studies to understand the dynamic interplay between memory of myth and its reconstruction by the myth reteller. Using Richard Feldman and Earl Conee's theory of Evidentialism, the paper analyses how myth is sought to be legitimized and historicized for modern readers. It then moves on to its main focus—an appraisal of the newness of myth retelling in *Unusual Tales*—with the help of John Stephens and Robyn McCallum's critical investigation into the retelling of traditional narratives for children as outlined in *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature*. Stephens and McCallum's ideas about the ideological underpinnings of traditional narratives for children have provided the broad conceptual thrust for this paper and influenced its inquiry into how, if at all, retold myths 'fiddle' with, or destabilize the reimagined myth, especially for children.

Stephens and McCallum firstly claim that if retold stories form a large part of children's literature, it is because they "serve to initiate children into aspects of a social heritage, transmitting many of a culture's central values and assumptions and a body of shared allusions and experiences" (1998, p. 3). They contend, however, that as "conservative metanarratives," traditional stories like myths, fairy tales, folk tales, heroic legends, and biblical and classical myths contain "implicit and usually invisible ideologies, systems, and assumptions which operate globally in a society to order knowledge and experience" (p. 3). Further, these stories tend to encourage "conformity to socially determined and approved patterns of behavior . . . by offering positive role models, proscribing undesirable behavior, and affirming the culture's ideologies, systems, and institutions" (pp. 3-4). Despite this, reversions of traditional tales have the potential to "both legitimize

and open to question their 'classic' pretexts," so that "there are always possibilities for resistance, contestation, and change" (p. 8). Drawing on these ideas, this paper evaluates *Unusual Tales* on the basis of the proposition that for a myth retelling to be truly unusual, simply reviving myth memory is not enough. Even if written for young readers, the myths retold must be 'fiddled' with, played with, unsettled, or destabilized, if they are to resonate with children today. As Jack Zipes argues with regard to the fairy tale, a truly liberating or emancipatory fairy tale is that which actively seeks '*disturbance*' (2006, p.188). The same could be said of myth retellings: they are as unusual only as far as they are '*upsetting*' (p.188).

At the outset, it is worth clarifying that the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* differ from western myths in that they are sacred, not secular, in nature. Indeed, the conventional distinction between myth and epic in western literary traditions does not apply to these metanarratives for they are widely referred to as myth and epic at one and the same time. If Indian literary traditions often conflate the genres of myth and epic, it is because their origins lie in the nation's oral traditions; hence, "Indian epics are mythological in spirit" (Jha, 2016, p.187). Although Varsha Jha (2016) believes that the fluid and blurred boundary between myth and epic, what she calls an "interpenetration" (p.189), is what lends the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to a plethora of retellings, one could argue that this is true of all myths: retelling is the only way myths can survive. Neil Gaiman explains that myths "begin as religions, the most deeply held of beliefs, or as the stories that accrete to religions as they grow" but later become myth, or compost, when they can no longer be taken literally (1999, p. 76). Even if condemned to turn into compost, myths can still bloom their way out of their "cruelly Darwinist" fate; the compost can become "a fertile ground for other stories and tales which blossom like wildflowers" (pp. 81, 77). Myths have produced the most spectacular stories in human history, and its archetypal characters are especially captivating because of the "peculiar feeling of numinosity that accompanies them—the fascination or spell that emanates from them" (Jung, 1961, as cited in Ellwood, 1999, p. 71). But the questions this paper strives to answer is, how does an author weave this magic for readers and keep myth memory alive in the process? To put it another way, what does the process of "newing the original epic" entail (Sharma, 2016, p.155)?

Retrieving Myth Memory

According to Jonathan K. Foster, contemporary memory studies theorists posit remembering as a "*selective and interpretive process*" (2009, p. 6). In accordance with the work of Frederick Bartlett (who initiated the second great tradition in memory research in the first half of the 20th century), modern theorists contend that memory is not reproduced but reconstructed; more importantly, the reconstructive nature of remembering the past is rooted in the present, in "our existing presuppositions, expectations and our 'mental set'" (p. 12). Further, the one engaged in the task of

remembering behaves like a paleontologist who tries to assemble a dinosaur from fragments of bone (p.14). Not unlike paleontologists, myth retellers also act as agents of reconstruction. Though they work with remnants of memory instead of fragments of bone, they rely on the present to recreate the past as much as paleontologists do.

What kind of memories come into play while linking the past with the present? When adult authors reimagine and re-situate ancient myths in the here and now for the children of today, the reconstructed myth is more than twice mediated because it emerges at the intersection of more than one type of memory. The retold myth is, first of all, a product of the author's personal myth memory but this memory is itself derived from the community's larger collective cultural memory. And since most myths are first encountered in the formative years of childhood, the author's individual myth memory is likely to be inseparable from memories of childhood. Murty admits as much in the preface to *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree*: "I have, through this book, tried my best to retell stories that I grew up listening to and reading over the years" (2019, p. x).

The prickly task of myth retelling gets fractious at the stage of retrieval itself for it raises questions about the 'pre-texts' (a term used by Stephens and McCallum to refer to the source text a retold myth derives from) that shaped the author's memory of the recounted myths. The overlay of memories, nebulous as memories often are, makes myth retelling a somewhat nebulous exercise tantamount to the chasing of chimeras but it does not deter some myth rewriters from asserting the existence of a pure, pristine, or ur-version of a myth and who find unsettling any attempt to deviate from it for that reason. But belief in the existence of an authentic monomyth is itself a myth. A.K. Ramanujan (1998) estimates that there are more than three hundred *Ramayanas* in existence; who is to say which one is the real one? Murty similarly acknowledges the existence of multiple versions in the introduction to *The Upside Down King*:

We have all heard commonly told stories of the lives of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna. Many versions of these abound and can be easily found in books and on the Internet. (2018, p. xiii)

It is perhaps unavoidable for myth to be drawn into ideological contestations about who has the power to legitimize a myth or establish its veracity as the one true version. Can myth retrieval avoid being turned into a memory contest? Indian mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik suggests that the *Ramayana* be viewed as a "tradition" rather than as a text since in any case, this "textual obsession" is a legacy of Protestantism which came to India through colonization (as cited in Kanjilal, 2018, para.11). Ramanujan, on his part, declares that subsequent retellings of the *Ramayana* be considered "meta-Ramayana's" belonging to a family of *Ramayanas* (1989, p. 203). Seen thus, different versions of the myth, self-reflexive and intertextual as they always are, become "signifiers in a new system: mirrors again that become windows," not "interlopers and anachronisms" (p. 207). Those who affirm that the collective memory stored in myth is best protected by eternally adapting

it would commend this stance, as Benu Verma does, for example: “The very nature of myth being open-ended, every effort at particularizing it through a new story, location or purpose widens the scope for more alternative storylines for its characters, situations and objectives” (n.d., p. 82). Some might perceive such a widening as an unwelcome destabilization, but is not every reworked myth always already destabilized by virtue of being a reversion of the source myth it derives from?

On the matter of a single authentic pre-text, Sharma argues that there is indeed such a thing as an original text, but it is one that exists in collective memory as an “invariant” version, or the version that we have known since childhood, and which we tend to resist if deviated from (2016, p. 150). The ‘invariant’ versions of myth tend to be perceived as distortions of myth memory, either as deliberately provocative efforts to destroy the cultural, religious, even historical memories enshrined in the ‘original’ myth, or as a sign of disrespect for ‘our’ sacred texts. As Sharma puts it, “In India, like in many other countries of the world, it is fatal to fiddle with the sacred” (p. 151). Gowri Ramnarayan similarly notes that because of the *Ramayana’s* identity as a religious myth, there is a general intolerance to reworking mainstream versions of it (such as those of Valmiki, Kamban, and Tulsidas written in the languages of Sanskrit, Tamil, and Avadhi respectively): “Objective studies of iconoclastic versions and subaltern narratives are banned” (2019, para. 6). The argument of this paper is that ‘fiddling’ with the sacred is a desirable project, one that needs to feature more prominently in retold myths for children since calling into question the visible and hidden ideologies embedded in myth is not the same as destroying it if the myth is dismantled only to be put together in a new way.

Legitimizing Myth with ‘Evidentiary Traces’

Retelling myth brings into focus the epistemological function of memory. Is memory knowledge or testimony? This question has been at the center of philosophical perspectives on memory for long. Robert Audi remarks,

Memory is immensely important for both justification and knowledge Any serious study of the epistemological role of memory raises difficult questions about how memory justifies beliefs and grounds knowledge. (1995, p. 31)

Nonetheless, memory studies make a distinction between memory and testimony. The general view is that memory preserves knowledge while testimony transmits knowledge but that neither of the two is generative with respect to knowledge. The Preservation View of Memory claims that “memory cannot make an unknown proposition known, an unjustified belief justified, or an irrational belief rational—it can only preserve what is already known, justified, or rational” (Lackey, 2005, p. 637).

Going by this view it would seem that memory alone is insufficient to justify beliefs, and that it needs to be supported by something more. It is here that Evidentialism could be brought in to help understand how myth justification operates in *Unusual Tales*.

Evidentialism is important to both, the philosophy of religion as well as epistemology because it offers a theory of epistemic justification. Richard Feldman and Earl Conee describe Evidentialism "as a thesis about the justificatory status of all of the doxastic attitudes: belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment" (as cited in Mittag, n.d., para. 7). They define it such that "doxastic attitude, d, toward p is justified for one at t if and only if one's evidence at t supports one's taking d towards p" where p is the proposition and t the time (para.7). Myth is narrative, and hence, cannot advance propositions that can be justified through evidence. In fact, the very idea of evidence for myth seems preposterous, even laughable, and for this reason Evidentialism, strictly speaking, is not entirely applicable here. It could, however, help us appreciate a myth reteller's effort to represent myth as worthy of belief since Evidentialism is, among other things, "a thesis about what it takes for one to believe justifiably, or reasonably, in the sense thought to be necessary for knowledge" (para.3). A myth reteller, faced with the task of rendering the fantastic, the unbelievable, the ahistorical, and the unknowable as plausible, looks for ways to make myth worth remembering. The myth reteller understands that myth is more likely to be taken seriously if it is accepted at least to some degree as knowledge, as truth, or even as history. But since there can be no verifiable evidence for myth, Murty does the next best thing: she provides a variety of what could be called 'evidentiary traces' of myth to nudge readers towards belief. As Connerton declares, "Knowledge of all human activities in the past is possible only through a knowledge of their traces" (1989, p. 13).

The evidentiary traces that bear testimony to myth exist are painstakingly pointed out in *Unusual Tales* to provide a basis for myth as knowledge (about religion, history, and culture), implying that if it is worth knowing about, it is worth remembering. These evidentiary traces could be seen to function as 'normative defeaters,' one of the two types of defeaters that can make propositions of true belief be accepted as knowledge (Lackey, 2005). Unlike 'doxastic defeaters,' by which one comes to believe that something is true even if it does not have the necessary justification, 'normative defeaters' require a person to believe something because there is evidence for it (Lackey, 2005). This could be why *Unusual Tales* provides evidentiary traces of myth as 'normative defeaters' in anticipation of the fact that even children, young as they are, may not be so naïve as to blindly believe the mythic without adequate 'evidence.' As Karl Mannheim argues, "past experience is only relevant when it exists concretely incorporated in the present" (2011, p. 93). Drawing attention to the evidentiary traces of myth in the here and now, enables the myth reteller to close the gap that separates the past and the present, the sacred and the secular, the imaginary and the real. Examples of evidentiary traces in *Unusual Tales* are relentless. Readers are told that the temple of Lord Shiva is "still around" in Srikalahasti, a town in

the state of Andhra Pradesh (Murty, 2017, p. 65); that the Nag (Snake) Temple, where Karkotaka and Nala from the story "The Princess and the Ugly Dwarf" were supposed to have met, still exists in today's state of Uttarakhand (Murty, 2019, p. 89); and that the statue of Ajji (she was actually Goddess Yakshi in disguise) clutching a pot of milk still stands in what is present day Shraavanbelagola (Murty, 2019, p. 72). Myth is further historicized when the descent and lineage of the mythic characters is traced down to the present, as Lord Ram's is for example, when he is identified as a descendant of the Suryavamshi or Ishvaku dynasty that included legendary figures such as King Harishchandra (Murty, 2018, p. 3). To the extent that such information construes myth as history, and thus as knowledge, it helps deflect the skepticism that modern readers might bring to their reading of myth. Skepticism is the enemy of myth, and myth memory can only sustain itself in relation to it: the more one believes the greater the desire to remember. In *Unusual Tales*, myth is proffered as legend and belief but equally as history, knowledge, and truth to establish, to whatever degree possible, the facticity of the mythic narratives. Such an exercise in reification to mitigate the abstractionism of myth transfigures myth into something that is at least possible if not entirely knowable or believable.

Yet, on many occasions, *Unusual Tales* veers away from the historical. Consider, for example, the statement "A mythological story surrounding the Ganga suggests that Vishnu took the avatar of a dwarf named Vamana" (Murty, 2019, p. 55). The word "mythological" implicates the narrative rooted in belief or legend. Historical specificity is tempered with the tentativeness of the mythical so that the ahistorical co-exists with the historical. Phrases such as "it is said," "it is considered to be," "according to legend" and the like dot the narration throughout *Unusual Tales*, but while they dilute the omniscient narrator's definitive assertions they also remind us that sometimes myth is simply legend or lore. As Murty admits in the introduction to *The Serpent's Revenge: Unusual Tales from the Mahabharata*, the Puranas are "less accurate" than history (2016, p. xi). She goes on to highlight the fictionality of myth when she tells her readers, "Don't ever forget that these tales are not practical or real – they are simply stories" (p. xii). The pendulum swings between the fictionality and reality of myth, never quite settling on one for too long.

Destabilizing Myth in the *Unusual Tales*

The question of destabilizing myth enters critiques of myth retellings because myth and ideology are never far apart. For the purpose of this paper, destabilization of myth is understood as a reinterpretation of, or 'fiddling' with, received versions of myth in ways that impel a rethinking of their meaning and value. The extent to which a myth is destabilized depends on the degree to which the myth reteller is willing to challenge deeply ingrained versions that have the approval of the community's dominant group. Yet, reversions, especially radical ones, tend to be rejected outright. Stephens and

McCallum have a theory that could explain why this might be the case: the new narrative might be so “incompatible” with the old one that it could cause a “cultural crisis” (1998, p. 9). Further, if radical retellings, such as feminist reversions for example, acquire significance, it could prove disastrous for the pre-texts and for the reversions that would be rendered “unreadable and beyond recuperation” on account of the reworking (p. 9).

Consider a few examples of contemporary Indian revisionings of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* for adult readers. Pramod Ranjan’s *Mahishasur: Myth and Tradition*, rewrites the famous story of the battle between Goddess Durga and the demon (asur) Mahishasur in a way that subverts the representation of the latter as an arch villain. Chitra Divakurni Banerjee’s novel *Palace of Illusions* narrates the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi’s perspective. Amit Chaudhari retells the story of Surpanakha in his short story “An Infatuation” (2009) in a way that allows the retold myth to act as “an important corrective to the silence that has attended Rama’s and Laxmana’s cruel behavior toward Surpanakha” (Luthra, 2014, p. 146). Feminist revisions of folk songs by women characterize Rama as a “*papishthi* (sinner) or madman” for abandoning his wife (p.146). Folk reversions also make Sita more than a loyal wife; she is reimagined as a warrior woman who leads battles against demons (Ramanujan, 1989, p. 213). Such reversions, even as they attest to the hypnotic power these myths continue to wield well into the twenty-first century, stem from an awareness that prevailing orthodox versions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* do not speak for everyone, and that the patriarchal and Brahmanical ideologies nestled in them need to be dismantled. Tulika Parikh, for example, notes that in the case of women who do happen to feature prominently in mainstream versions of the two epics, they are “all high caste, Kshatriya or Brahmin women and daughters, wives, sisters and friends of important men” but who are, nevertheless, etched as models of virtues such as love, sacrifice and beauty and assigned secondary or even tertiary roles in retold myths (2021, p. 3). The again, Ranjan remarks about traditional renderings of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, “A class has maintained economic and political dominance using these stories” (as cited in Mishra, 2018, para. 6).

This recognition of how myths can be predicated upon troubling caste or gender ideologies has yet to make its way into myth retellings for children. Most retellings of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* for children prefer to take the conventional route, showing little inclination to experiment either with content or form in their reversions. Examples of straightforward narrations of the epics include Namita Gokhale’s *The Puffin Mahabharata* (2009) and Anita Nair’s *The Puffin Book of Magical Indian Myths* (2007). Madhur Jaffrey’s *Seasons of Splendour: Tales, Myths and Legends of India* (1985) revives mythic stories heard in childhood but mostly with a nostalgic longing for the romanticized traditional childhood upbringing the author had. These kinds of reversions stand in opposition to those that take a different approach to myth retelling for children. Meera Uberoi’s *Lord Ganesha’s Feast of Laughter* (2006) and Devdutt Pattanaik’s *Fun in Devlok*

Omnibus series (2014) use humor as the dominant mode in their reversions. One of the intriguing stories in *Fun in Devlok* revolves around Lord Krishna arriving at the airport in a pair of jeans while another story has Lord Shiva playing Dumb Charades with a group of children. In *The Girl Who Chose: A New Way of Telling the Ramayana* (2016), Pattanaik makes an effort to trace Sita's trajectory instead of Lord Rama's. With the exception of a few retellings like these, however, most other reworkings evince a reluctance to take a dissenting position in relation to the epics, something that is especially problematic when the retelling is posited as different, or unusual.

Unusual Tales does make that claim. In the introduction to *The Upside Down King*, Murty declares that she wanted to tell stories of the Lord Rama and Lord Krishna to show "their human side, instead of just reflecting on them as gods" (2018, p. xiii). In the introduction to *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree*, she claims she wrote it because she was disappointed with what her "research" on myth had shown:

there is minimal literature that highlights the important roles that women have played The literature that does exist is frequently repetitive and women are usually cast as subordinate and minor characters and remain underappreciated. (2019, p. ix)

How unusual then is Murty's retelling of myth in the light of these stated objectives?

Feminist revisionings, though common in myth retellings for adults, are not usually found in myths retold for children. *Unusual Tales*, however, brings to the forefront of collective myth memory the women obliterated from retold myths. Parikh notes that conventional retellings have typically marginalized women like Ravana's sister Surpanakha and his wife Madodari (2021, p. 2). The erasure and subordination of such women in myth retellings for children is remedied in *Unusual Tales* by including stories about Surpanakha and others like her. Not only that, in keeping with the trend of provocative feminist reworkings of myth for adult readers in India and across the world, *Unusual Tales* also tries hard to combat the representation of women as meek and pliant beings, or as mere appendages to their more potent male counterparts. In "The God with the Head of a Horse," for example, Lord Vishnu finds himself at the receiving end of his wife. True to her portrayal as "an independent thinker and an uncompromising wife," Goddess Lakshmi rants at her husband for insulting her family, especially for mocking one of her brothers for "galloping around" like a horse all day (Murty, 2019, p. 12). She ends her tirade with these words, "Maybe in time you will understand what it means to be a horse" (p.18). Lord Vishnu ends up with a horse's head soon enough.

While stories such as "The God with the Head of a Horse" are gratifying, they do not radically redefine the goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Even when the goddesses are depicted as women of might, almost militant at times, the feminist project is weakened by an unnecessary emphasis on their feminine attributes or by letting the male gods

overshadow them. Thus, if Lord Brahma desired a “knowledgeable companion,” a woman who was “intelligent,” “wise,” and “well-informed about arts and culture,” he also expected her to be “quiet,” and have “great control over tongue and mind” (Murty, 2019, p. 3). The same is the case with women other than the goddesses. In “A Tale of Three Fathers,” Ajigrata is given a name but his wife is referred to by the generic phrase “the wife” (Murty, 2021, p. 43). Ajigrata, too, addresses her as “Dear wife” instead of by her name (p. 43). The same is the case in the story “The Snake that Sole Earrings.” The male protagonist is identified by his name, Veda, but his spouse is not; instead, she is simply “Veda’s wife.” (p. 24). What’s more, when asked by Veda’s student what she would like to have as guru dakshina (the gift a student gives a teacher as a gesture of gratitude), she says she would like to have a pair of gold earrings because she is after all a woman (p. 24). The stereotype of the avaricious woman runs alongside the image of the jealous woman: Veda’s wife confesses to the student, “If I wear the earrings during the festival, everyone will notice them” (p. 25). In “The Ring of Memory,” Shakuntala is etched as the archetype of the weak and helpless woman: shy, nervous, and weepy. In opposition to docile women like Shakuntala is Devayani in “The Princess Who Became a Wedding Gift.” Devayani knows her own mind and is not afraid to speak it but she is cast in a negative light as selfish, insensitive, and too stubborn for her own good, all because she refused to submit to the authority of father, husband, and lover Kacha. Her anger at being repeatedly thwarted by the men in her life is undermined by the unstated moral that strong-minded women come to a disastrous end before long. Her husband Yayati secretly falls in love with, marries, and has children with Sharmishtha, the friend Devayani had kept hidden as her slave. On learning about his deception, Devayani confronts him only to leave him when he admits the truth. She insists that her father should curse her husband but he asks her to forgive him, appealing to her duty as wife and mother: “Think about the consequences to your children” (Murty, 2019, p. 109). As it stands, the story of Devayani takes the usual route: it is a cautionary tale about women who must be humbled for their hubris. On the whole, women like Shakuntala are upheld as ideals, for unlike Devayani, Shakuntala wins back the husband who had rejected her by her loyalty and her more forgiving nature.

Another feature that interferes with the feminist imperative in *Unusual Tales* is that even stories that begin as progressive renditions, collapse into the usual stereotypes before long. The story of Sujata in *The Sage with Two Horns* is a good example. The narrative begins on a promising note with its description of Sujata as a woman interested in philosophy (Murty, 2021, p. 11). Yet, she only pursues her love for the subject when she gets pregnant, and out of concern for the welfare of her unborn child:

Since Sujata was a traditional girl, she believed that listening to good things and thinking positively would allow her unborn child to absorb the goodness in the surroundings. So she began attending her husband’s classes regularly. (Murty, 2021, p. 11)

Sujata's love for philosophy is not important for its own sake; it is only serves to amplify her maternal character. Stories in *Unusual Tales* alternate between those that try to be non-conformist and those that reinforce negate female subjectivity, thus inhibiting its feminist intentions. Indeed, reconfiguring the collective memory of mythic women seems to require a more vigorous 'fiddling' with the mythic than *Unusual Tales* is willing to do.

As it turns out, Murty admits to having played around with the myths, albeit with a disclaimer that keeps her at a safe distance from the reversions:

I am not the author of these stories. I am simply a storyteller who has tried to dip into this ocean of ancient, mesmerizing tales after referring to multiple sources. (2016, p. xiv)

Further, she confesses that in reworking the myths, she omitted the "many illogical details" she thought would detract from their ability to be convincing (2016, p. xiv). Gaps in reworked myths are inevitable. As Parikh remarks, "When you re-imagine a myth, you add to the gaps in the narrative" (2021, p. 6). That may be so, but on many occasions, the narration creates gaps of its own, thereby raising more questions than it answers. In "The Ring of Memory," for example, Menaka's story is sketched in these words:

Menaka came down from the heavens and tried to distract the sage. After a lot of effort on her part, Vishvamitra opened his eyes. The moment he laid eyes on Menaka, the sage forgot his mediation and fell in love with her. The couple lived happily for a while, until they had a baby girl. (Murty, 2016, p. 5).

If anything, this brusque summary of Menaka's life, from the time Vishvamitra opened his eyes until they had a child, opens up more gaps than it closes since there is no mention of her perspective on her life experiences. A similar narrative style characterizes the narration of Satyavati's story. Once Parashara professed his love for her,

The awestruck Satyavati couldn't refuse his request and so, together, they settled on the island. In the course of time, they were blessed with a baby boy. (Murty, 2016, p.18)

Such abrupt narrations waste invaluable opportunities to articulate the silences of women by accommodating into the narratives their voices and perspectives. With a few exceptions, the fate of women in *Unusual Tales*, follows a pithy pattern: the women accept proposals of marriage from the men who make them their object of affection, bear them the children they desire, comply with all their demands after marriage, and then disappear almost entirely from the narrative. Existing less for their own sake than to fulfil some basic requirements of the plot, the women are soon left behind so that the narrative can move on to highlighting the heroic exploits of the mythic men.

Even if feminist revisionings in *Unusual Tales* disappoint on the whole, there is the occasional story that stands out as more progressive than the other stories in the

collection. One such story is that of Sudyumna in *The Serpent's Revenge*. Children's literature tends to be somewhat squeamish about the topic of sexuality in books for children. The inclusion of Sudyumna's story is especially heartening on that account. As narrated in "The Man Who Became a Woman," Sudyumna was transformed into a woman upon entering an enchanted forest. Instead of rejecting his female body, however, he reinvented himself as a woman, Ila. Goddess Parvati then blessed him with the ability to assume whatever form he desired but Sudyumna chose to remain a woman. He lived as Ila for many years after having a son with Chandra, the moon-god before he finally renounced his female identity to become a man once again. Sudyumna's story calls attention to the fluid boundaries of gender and sexuality, and paves the way for more stories that deflate heteronormative constructions of gender for child readers, and be truly unusual by so doing.

'Fiddling' with the Sacred for Child Readers

Liedeke Plate contends that "It is precisely its being both faithful and unfaithful to it, its writing both within and against the tradition, that makes a rewriting interesting and rewarding" (2008, p. 393). That may be so, but retelling myths like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* is not quite the same as retelling other myths for they are treated as more than just epics in India and amongst Hindus in particular; they are revered as scripture. The degree of caution to be exercised in retelling these myths, whether for children or for adults, is thus exacerbated on that account. Even so, retelling the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* for children differs markedly from retelling them for adults.

For one thing, myth retelling for children is unique because the myths encountered in childhood are often a child's first introduction to the community's revered metanarratives. Reworking myths for children thus entails a greater responsibility for the myth reteller.

Secondly, deriving from memory studies, one could theorize that at least a part of the difference between myth retelling for adults and children has to do with the role of memory. The first tradition of memory, initiated by Hermann Ebbinghaus' 19th century study on memory, had shown that a person who had learnt something and then forgotten it could relearn it much faster than someone who had never learnt it in the first place, possibly because of the presence of some residual memory in the mind of the former (Foster, 2009). Later, Bartlett's work showed that people's memories were "to some extent, mediated by their emotional and personal commitment to—and investment in—the original to-be-remembered event" (Foster, 2009, p.12). When applied to myth retelling, the work of Ebbinghaus and Bartlett suggests that the process of myth consumption is different for children because they do not have prior memory of or nostalgia for myth. Hence, they are unlikely to react to a retold myth with the same attitude of awe and reverence as adults are wont to do. As the Indian myth scholar Devdutt Pattanaik remarks,

to win the approbation of the young, the retold version must be made “cool without trivializing it” (as cited in Kanjilal, 2018, para. 7).

Yet another explanation proffered for what makes myth retellings for children a unique exercise leans on the idea of the postmodern, famously described by Jean Francois Lyotard as an “incredulity towards the metanarratives” (1979, p. xxiv). The postmodern age emerged in the late twentieth-century, but I argue that the condition of childhood has always been the condition of the postmodern. Every child is born into postmodernity, for true to the postmodern spirit of skepticism, irreverence, subjectivism, and relativism, children are naturally inclined to suspect, question, and play with everything that constitutes their lived experience—until they grow up.

The question is, do we really want children to grow up if it means growing out of the postmodern attitude of incredulity and skepticism? Should it be a threat if they do? Harini Gopalakrishnan, for example, tells of how she had exhibited the expected attitude of wonder and admiration towards her grandmother’s spirited narration of the *Ramayana* as a child; it was only later that questions about the “dubious elements” in the representation of Lord Rama emerged (2019, para. 3). She began to wonder whether even Sage Valmiki, the author, had ever intended Rama to be venerated as a god or a superhero considering how he had overtly highlighted his many flaws. Still, she considers the *Ramayana* a great work today precisely because “It does not glorify Rama beyond all wrongs” (para. 9). Gopalakrishnan’s example shows that if a conventional narration as that of Valmiki’s *Ramayana* could not prevent her from developing a more critical attitude to the epics heard in childhood at a later date, resistance to reworked retellings might be in vain.

Finally, we could agree that ‘fiddling’ with myth in retellings for children is exigent because children are not passive recipients of culture. Even a child can function as a “participant in a larger public process in which public meanings are negotiated” (Bruner, 1990, p.13). Further, if “Our culturally adapted way of life depends upon . . . shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretation” (p.13), then rewritten myths could be that mode of discourse, that site where ideas about identity, history, truth, and justice can be pulled apart and restored anew for young readers. Myth retellers for children, therefore, play a vital role when they rework myths for the young. They can help children sustain the childhood mood of irreverence and play. A generation that grows up postmodern, comfortable both with questioning cultural metanarratives that rest on rigid constructs of caste, gender, and history, is the need of the hour in India today seeing how fundamentalist and reactionary forces have gained both authority and momentum in recent years. “Myths are obliging,” says Gaiman (1999, p. 77). But extremists, fanatics, and zealots are not.

One way of combating the monomania unleashed by partisan politics and the politicization of our cultural heritage is by retelling myths in ways that dismantle the

troubling ideologies contained in myth without destroying the myth itself. As Stephens and McCallum declare, when old narratives are retold,

there is a high probability that replication of an old content and mode of representation may result in the further replication of, for example, old masculinist and antifeminist metanarratives. At the same time, retold stories have the potential to disclose how old stories suppress the invisible, the untold, and the unspoken. (1998, p. 22)

This potential can be fulfilled by “changing the modes of representation as well as, and more than, changing the content” (1998, p. 22).

Expanding on the notion of changing the pre-text, or playing with it, Christine Garlough explains that play is inseparable from power (2013, p. 151). Critical play, in particular, “engages with traditional figures and representations, institutional frameworks, and cultural norms to aid in critiques of domination” (p. 152). She argues that risking what one believes by playing with traditional narratives is transgressive in nature but it is what allows one to understand the new and the unknown. In fact, “The experience of critically playing with narrative form and content from one’s own cultural orientation is a process of empowerment” (p. 149). Does this not imply that a society that reveres its myths will embrace playing or ‘fiddling’ with them lest they turn into anachronisms or mere vegetative signifiers.

Conclusion

This study of *Unusual Tales* set out to evaluate the unusual component of its retellings. It concludes that *Unusual Tales* is unusual for the manner in which the retold myths interweave memory, myth, geography, history, and religion into a rich tapestry whose design is framed and supported with evidentiary traces of the presence of myth in the here and now. Directing the reader’s attention to the visible traces that the mythic past has left behind does make the mythic more believable. The claim to be unusual, however, is somewhat problematic because it does not entirely fulfil its promise of newness. In one interview, Murty declared that writing mythological stories is challenging:

Because the results are known, the end is known. Somebody has created that limit and you have to play within that limit. (as cited in Press Trust of India, para. 11)

Contrary to Murty’s claim, however, *Unusual Tales* flinches from stretching its limits to be more playful with the myths it retells.

In conclusion, it is perhaps worth stressing that unusual critiques of myth retellings are as valuable as the retold myths themselves. Critical engagements with myth revisionings for children have scope to examine the many inversions and subversions that frame the surface and deeper structure of the reimagined myths. Of greater import than writers and

critics of myth retellings for children, however, is the child consumer of myth. The potentially unobliging frame of reference of the reading child has the potential to animate, and render truly unusual, the most droll of conversations on myths and their reversions.

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