The Story of a Feminist Woman-Goddess: Re-reading, Re-telling and Ritualizing Draupadi in India Today

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Abstract
The paper analyzes Divakaruni’s rewriting of the mythical story of Draupadi (from Sanskrit Mahabharata) in her The Palace of Illusions (2008), as well as her projection in the Indian popular rituals. It investigates Draupadi’s iconic status as a fierce feminist standing her ground even against the violence she experiences at the hands of men, among them, her five husbands. My thesis is that the narrative of Draupadi will continue to remain a cult myth, thereby leading to more future artistic manifestations, primarily because her assimilation in the Indian cultural psyche is somewhat incomplete, as she remains an untamed woman with strong political and sociological views, refusing to bow down to the questionable standards of the Indian society, voicing her dissent, rage and protest at her exploitation at the hands of a patriarchal system. Her emancipation in the ancient narrative, and furthermore in the retellings and rituals today, acts both in favor of her as well as goes against her: she is a mythical woman who is denied justice and who is constantly demanding equanimity, thus becoming an icon for the supporters of equal rights for women in the present century, who can draw their inspiration from this ancient myth.

Keywords: Indian myth, Draupadi, the Mahabharaat, Divakaruni, feminist woman-goddess.

Introduction
The continuing process of rereading, revaluing and retelling mythology marks a rigorous critical engagement with the people’s past and their cultural memory. It is not particularly a 21st-century phenomenon that retellings of the epic Mahabharata, or those from the vantage point of Draupadi have been attempted: there exist precedents in medieval Sanskrit literature, as well as in literatures written in both vernacular languages and English, in India, in recent times. The paper takes a three-fold path in examining this myth.

First, it explicates why should we revisit and reread Draupadi’s story in the original narrative of the Mahabharata, preferably beyond a victim-perpetrator lens. Second, it attempts a critical reading of a contemporary retelling of Draupadi’s story by Chitra Baneree Divakaruni in her The Palace of Illusions (2008), which makes significant departures from the original epic in giving the reins of narration of an all-male enterprise (i.e. the Great War) in the hands of a female, somewhat flawed heroine. And third, the paper undertakes a brief study of the resurrection of the myth of Draupadi in various rituals and cults and popular culture in India, thereby examining the manifestation of a gendered cultural memory in contemporary India. Having examined all these areas in fair detail, the paper will head towards examining as its conclusion why this phenomenon of the rebirth and

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1While scholars largely disagree about the time frame when the epic was possibly composed, most of them believe that it was composed, orally, over a large period, ranging from 400 B.C.E to 400 C.E. However, eminent scholars of the Mahabharata, namely J.A.B. van Buitenen, James Fitzgerald, and Nicholas Sutton believe that the major narrative passages were composed between 400-200 B.C.E., and the later centuries had bards and redactors adding on to the main body of the narrative.
resurrection of the myth of Draupadi is here to stay, in light of the state of the feminist movement in India at the turn of the century.

An (Un)Familiar Myth: Revisiting/Rereading Draupadi in the Epic

The single most apocalyptic moment in the Indian folk/literary scene is the disrobing of a menstruating Draupadi in the Assembly Hall (as a result of her husband, Yudhisthira, the eldest Pandava, wagering and losing her in a game of dice with Duryodhana, his first cousin and the eldest Kaurava). This episode from the *Mahabharata* is often read as the reason for the tragic fratricidal war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Scholars have largely read the violation of a female body as leading to an all-engulfing violent war which knows no bounds. Needless to say, traditional scholarship has held Draupadi, like Helen of Troy, responsible for causing the war and the resultant massacre!

The character of Draupadi in the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, and the scene of her disrobing have disturbed readers of all generations for myriad reasons, the primary one being the fact that Draupadi represents the figure of the unprotected, vulnerable woman in a largely patriarchal society. Interestingly, Draupadi symbolizes a paradoxical blending of the feminine: she is both the victim of patriarchal mores in the epic, as well as the fiery woman who refuses to be victimized and give in to the adversity she finds herself in. She is, as Jung would say, a ‘shadow’, an ‘archetype’ in the ‘collective unconscious’ of the society: it is not unusual to come across cultures where women’s bodies are ‘shadows’ supposedly owned by men, and hence the cases of violence against women also abound everywhere in the world, more so in India (Sarieddine “Women”, n.p.). However, some women also rise up and lash out against the violence perpetrated on them, which, of course, is desirable and becomes exemplary.

According to Alf Hiltebeitel, one of the epic’s primary foci is “the question of who Draupadi is as a figure - a rebel, a figure who is independent, vigorous, challenging, a principled woman, a very difficult kind of woman, [and/or] intellectually shrewd” (xxvi). It is probably this overwhelming mystification in ascertaining who Draupadi is and what she stands for which has led artists, writers, and people to continue to re-narrate her story in the form of theater, performances, novels, poetry, and paintings; or to appropriate her into their daily lives and rituals.

Many scholars in the past have viewed Draupadi through a victim-perpetrator lens, thus pushing her real character to the background, losing sight of the fact that even in the epic, Draupadi is projected as an extremely knowledgeable lady, well-versed in the ancient Indian scriptures and knowledge texts, as well as various treatises on morality, ethics, law and the various arts. She was “an exponent of dialectics... best [witnessed] in her sabha confrontation” (Kumar 257). She is born out of a sacrificial fire to King Drupada of Pancala, and not of a woman’s womb, her birth being accompanied by the prophecy that she will bring about the ruin of the *ksatriyas* (the warrior class). She is depicted as beautiful, virtuous, independent, fiery and learned in the scriptures.

In a marriage contest, Draupadi is won by the middle Pandava, Arjuna, but on the command of Kunti, her mother-in-law, she marries all the five Pandava brothers. The epic gives several

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2 Sabha literally means the Assembly Hall, which, in ancient times, used to be a male assembly for administering matters of politics, strategy, and law.

3 Learning the scriptures was considered to be a male prerogative in the times when the epic was composed.

4 Having won Draupadi in the marriage contest, Arjuna and the Pandava brothers take her to their humble abode in a forest where they have been living in hiding from the world. When the brothers excitedly announce to their mother their arrival and ask her to turn around and look at what they have brought along, Kunti, without turning around, commands them to share whatever they have brought home. The command of the mother was never to go unfulfilled in the ancient Indian society, and hence Draupadi chooses to marry all the five brothers. An arrangement to avoid any discord amongst the brothers is later made, where it is decided that Draupadi will spend one year each with one husband, starting from the eldest, Yudhisthira, and at the end of every year, she will regain her virginity.
explanations for the polyandry of Draupadi, sometimes also projecting her as an incarnation of Sri, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. However, the epic leaves the exploration of a significant aspect of Draupadi’s heart and mind almost untouched: it leaves a lot of questions unanswered in depicting her quiet acceptance of a marriage to five husbands, and it makes readers wonder about the everyday challenges and emotional pangs that she, as a common wife, had to deal with, not to mention the curiosity about which of the five husbands she loved more than the others 5.

Various scholars of the *Mahabharata* also hold the heroine to be the undeserving victim of grave injustice in the epic. In the dicing scene, after Yudhisthira loses her in the game, Duryodhana orders that she be brought to the assembly of the Kauravas as a slave to the new masters. Draupadi refuses to come with the messenger till the time she receives an answer to her question: “Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?” She asks him to pose the question to Yudhisthira and come back to her with an answer. Interestingly, the question posed by the messenger in the Assembly Hall has been reframed by him as “As the owner of whom did you lose us?”, thus sharpening the focus of her question (Das 38). A menstruating Draupadi, clothed in a single blood-stained garment, hair dishevelled, is dragged into the Assembly Hall despite her protests; she is “seized, held down, shaken, ridiculed, called ‘a slave’ (*dāsī*), and almost fully stripped” (Hudson 98). The Kauravas continue to humiliate her: Karna questions her chastity and honor (owing to her five marriages), Dushasana attempts to disrobe her, and Duryodhana makes an indecent sexual gesture towards her. One is left to ponder upon the fact that if Draupadi, a queen and wife of five husbands, can be treated in this way, how much more will the magnitude of the horror that awaits ordinary and unattached women be!

Scholars note the conflict involved in reading the episode of the dicing in the epic, with Draupadi at the receiving end of violence at the hands of men. She is not someone who would allow her oppressors (both the Kauravas and the Pandavas) violate her self-dignity, her body, or her position (she was freshly anointed as the Queen of Indraprastha). She constantly reminds her violators in the Assembly Hall about the act of transgression they have committed. However, the assembly of wise men is largely quiet about the double-transgression of her feminine self as well as her body, thereby failing to answer the pointed questions she poses to the elders in the Hall about her right to dignity as a woman and a wife, about the idea of ownership and propriety, slavery and freedom, and the duties of a king. McGrath maintains that though Draupadi in the epic is characterized by “wrathfulness” and “adroit and subtle use of forceful language”, she is “a figure of paramount suffering” (153). She is “the doll or puppet who speaks, who even recognizes herself as such; as devi, she is the lady who plays who is also played” (Hiltebeitel 198). Sally Sutherland believes that “the character of Draupadi has a special appeal, for coupled with victimization, is a strong realization of her victimization. And she responds to it by mounting aggressive and outspoken attacks on her oppressors (including her husbands, who are supposed to be her protectors) and questions Yudhisthira’s right over her, especially after having lost himself in the game. She makes this into a legal question of the rights of a husband over a wife, and the freedom of a wife/woman and poses it to the assembly of men, kings and lawmakers. Mukhoty rightfully points out: “Throughout the... epic [especially after her humiliation], she follows the dictates of her own sense of justice” (15).

5These significant questions and emotions of Draupadi have been dealt with quite satisfactorily, by future writers who have been engaged in a perennial quest to deconstruct her character. A significant case study that the paper undertakes is that of Divakaruni’s retelling.

6Hiltebeitel puts forth a very interesting proposition in his article titled “Draupadi’s Question”, where he sets out to enquire about the possible links between “goddesses and flesh-and-blood historical women” by tracing “what a heroine questions”, since this, according to him, would help in arriving at the answer to the question of whether or not “the goddess is a feminist” (196).
By standing her ground and asking the question, Draupadi is really revealing the dark side of the masculine code of both heroism and chivalry, which unconsciously though, presumes its ownership of women and their bodies (Shah 47). Shah also suggests that Draupadi’s questioning of her humiliating treatment ends up exposing them rather than her, as was the Kaurava intent (47). Lena Taneja strongly holds that “Draupadi never seems to doubt for a moment that is truly free. It is perhaps her sense of freedom that keeps her sticking to the question that will also free her husbands” (Taneja qtd. in Hiltebeitel 200).

The foregoing discussion elucidates the necessity of revisiting and rereading the story of Draupadi. Since the debate on whether she should be looked at with sympathy/empathy, or as an exceptionally strong woman who stood her ground in the face of violence and hardships still continues, one is inclined to think that all is not yet over with the character and the story associated with her! This unsettled contestation about what this mythical character really stands for today, is possibly the fuel that keeps propelling her many rebirths and resurrections in literature, art and popular culture from the ancient and medieval times, down to this day! Draupadi’s life and her continuing legacy has also set great examples for the posterity, quite feminist and humanist in their impetus for an egalitarian society. This may be another reason why women in India, especially, continue to hark back to the trials and tribulations of Draupadi, both in their bid to expose the treatment meted out to women in a male-dominated society, and as a source of inspiration to steer clear of the tyranny of such a society!

A Heroine Extraordinaire: Retelling Draupadi’s Story

In The Palace of Illusions (2008), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni takes up the daunting task of delving deep into Draupadi’s inner recesses and giving voice to a mythical woman’s most intimate feelings, her constant struggles and the test she is subjected to in a patriarchal society, the numerous instances of thwarting of her innermost emotions that her multiple marriages might have entailed for her, and her secretive love for the one man she can never have as her husband or make her feelings known to him. Divakaruni’s novel is quite modern in its approach to contemporary issues of home and belonging, love and defeated emotions, war and the realization of its futility, and, most importantly, in its depiction of a fiercely independent woman who refuses to give in to the pressure of patriarchy, and fights tooth and nail till her last breath.

Reading through Divakaruni’s novel, one can easily discern a woman writer seeking to wrestle with the psychology of another fictional woman: Draupadi’s extraordinary birth from a sacrificial fire, her upbringing under the constant realization of being an unwanted child7, her agony resulting from her marriage to five husbands, the cold tussle with her mother-in-law who is the trigger behind her polyandrous marriages, the challenges involved in loving all her husbands equally and serving them all like a loyal and caring wife, and her willing suppression of her secret admiration for Karna, to name a few. As opposed to the semi-divine, largely unperturbed and composed Draupadi in the epic, Divakaruni tries to illuminate a larger tension in her narrative: the human conflict between the individual self of Draupadi, and the gendered, social norms that she is expected to perfect, like any other fellow female, all the while bearing in her heart the burden of not being loved singularly or not being able to reciprocate her love, of being unwillingly thrown into a situation where she is forced to have multiple alliances, and hence bearing the ignominy of being labelled as a fallen woman. Her

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7Draupadi’s father, King Drupada, conducted a massive sacrifice which went on for a month in his desire to have a son, who would spell the doom of his enemy Drona (who was once his dear friend). At the end of the sacrifice, he is blessed with a son, Dhristadymma, and also a daughter, Draupadi. The birth of the latter was not desired by Drupada in the first place. Divakaruni exploits this motif in the epic and lets her young heroine believe that she was an unwanted child in the household, a factor which contributes significantly to the development of Draupadi’s relationship with her brother, her governess Dhai Ma, her sister, Shikhandi, and her vision of her future in the novel.
character illustrates Simone de Beauvoir’s postulation about what it means to ‘become’ a woman in a patriarchal society. Divakaruni makes an attempt to redefine female subjectivity by re-negotiating the distribution of power in a socio-cultural setup, where the female protagonist is invested with the agency to feel as well as the freedom to fall, unlike in the epic where Draupadi is expected to live up to her role as the ideal *dharmapatni* (lawfully wedded wife, and partner in duties) of Dharmaraja Yudhisthira, and mostly maintain a stoic image of womanhood who privileges responsibility over passion.

*The Palace of Illusions* unfolds in four parts: the first dealing with Draupadi’s birth and childhood, and her impatience to grow up and fulfil her destiny of changing the course of history, and the young Draupadi disliking the lonely walls of her father’s palace, harboring dreams of having a beautiful palace of her own when she grows up. Krishna is projected as her constant friend, companion and guide, who also quenches her thirst for knowledge. Though Krishna, her father and her brother want her to marry Arjuna, she has set her heart on Karna before the *swayamvar*, but Krishna and the love for her brother ensure that she marries the former. She leaves with Arjuna to enter a small hut instead of a palace, which marks her “initiation into womanhood”, as Kunti on the other hand commands her sons to share Draupadi between themselves (Multani 223). This is followed by an intense power struggle between Kunti and Draupadi, as the latter believes Kunti wilfully forced her into multiple alliances because she wanted to perpetrate on her what she herself went through: Kunti was married to King Pandu, but had to perform levirate with four other gods to beget children. Meanwhile, Draupadi’s dream “Palace of Illusions” is built by Maya in the barren land of Khandav.

The third part of the novel begins with Draupadi’s journey to Hastinapur with her husbands, where the (in)famous scene of dicing plays itself out. Banerjee depicts Draupadi’s “complex feelings... [of] helplessness, agony, anger, shame and anguish... [where s]he overcame her vulnerability as Krishna’s voice resonates in her mind, ‘No one can shame you if you don’t allow it’” (Multani 223-24). Divakaruni thus harps on the strength of Draupadi’s character rather than Krishna or some overarching idea of cosmic justice having saved her from humiliation, as the story in the original epic and its various recensions go, rendering her as a strong woman full of intrinsic self-worth, regardless of what is done to her mortal body. Divakaruni probably harps on the idea that the body of a woman will cease to be associated with a false sense of honor if the woman herself refuses to acknowledge the same, thus turning the patriarchal logic on its head.

Draupadi in the novel also rises up as a “goddess of revenge and retribution”, and Divakaruni shows her aging, growing “old, wrinkled with matted hair”, and it is only after this period of calming down that she can avenge herself upon the Kauravas, also realizing the futility of war by that time, the horrific dawning upon her of the fact that “[f]or the wives of the common soldiers she was a witch who would transform them into widows” (Multani 224). The illusion of her palace comes shattering down completely at this juncture. In the last stage of her life, Draupadi renounces the world along with her husbands to the Himalayas, and when death grips her, she experiences only the comforting warmth of her soul mate, Krishna, and the true palace awaiting her above, whose “walls are space, the floor is sky, its center everywhere” (Divakaruni 360). Draupadi thus achieves an expansiveness and immortality which is somewhat lacking in the epic’s heroine. The last two sections on war and the ascent to heaven are also highly philosophical in their foregrounding of the emptiness of war (a largely male construct and domain), and the limitations of mortal life (and

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8 Born of the union of the god of righteousness, Dharma, Yudhishthira is regarded as the ideal man who will safeguard duty and righteousness under all circumstances.

9 Krishna is a highly revered character in the epic. He later came to be worshipped as a deity, leading to a rise of the ancient cult of Vaishnavism. He is worshipped in various forms even today, with temples and places of worship dedicated to him all over the country.

10 A *swayamvara* was a marriage contest where a princess would choose her prospective husband from among the assembled men who were supposed to win that contest.
body). It is, however, noteworthy, that Draupadi becomes the mouthpiece for such philosophical discourses in the novel.

Another point I would like to mention briefly is the fact that the exclusion of women from war can point to the position the *Mahabharata* takes towards its definition of femininity. Shah points out that “in spite of the entire epic revolving around a great war, there is no reference to any woman handling weapons. Draupadi... is a mere fiery exhorter to her husbands; nowhere does she emerge as an active war-figure” (181). Divakaruni, however, gifts her Draupadi with the divine vision which is otherwise only available to Sanjaya (for narrating the war to Dhritarashtra), which symbolically extols Draupadi not as a mere spectator, but as an active and critical witness of the Great War, also making her privy to all secret conversations, like those between Karna and Kunti, and between Bhishma and Karna. Not only can she ‘see’, but also ‘hear’, and hence ‘know’ more than the epical heroine, thus adding to her might as a well-informed character in the novel. Particularly interesting is Draupadi establishing her own court of women after the war, to hear out the appeals of the widowed, downtrodden, or exploited women. This is another interesting departure from the epic that Divakaruni depicts, striking a blow to the male hegemonic order, the court of law being another traditionally ‘male’ arena, by letting her heroine have and preside over her own parallel court for dispensing justice, for women and by the womenfolk in the novel.

Divakaruni’s retelling of the epic with Draupadi as the narrator thus establishes the heroine, Draupadi, as an enlightened, empowered woman who takes the reins of her life in her control despite the limitations that an orthodox society levies on her, and demonstrates how, through the power of feeling, knowledge and argumentative skills, she attempts to break free of the shackles imposed on her by patriarchy and society, and breathes more freely, in fact, humanly. The retelling leads to a self-formation in the character of Draupadi, and, by extension, in the readers of Draupadi’s narrative (especially the female readership), demonstrating how she steers clear of multiple conflicts within herself, and how this has led to the possibility of the creation of new sociological and cultural identities through the medium of the aesthetically reincarnated Draupadi for contemporary women, especially in India.

From Myth to Heroine to Goddess: Draupadi in Rituals and Popular Culture

Draupadi reincarnates not merely in novels and literature, but also in some communities in India in the form of rituals and cults. Myth, as one would know, is essential to any ritual, and the latter becomes one of the contexts of the transmission of myths, which in turn serves the purpose of social reproduction, among many other functions (cf. Crook 8). Draupadi has been adapted as an idea at the level of the everyday through daily/seasonal/yearly rituals, leading to the survival and perpetuation of her image in contemporary India. Her story from the *Mahabharata*, especially the episodes recounted above, have found myriad interpretations and transformations, thus leading to numerous literary, dramatic, theatrical, performative, folkloristic and ritual retellings and transmissions.

Numerous theatrical and folkloristic traditions have developed around Draupadi, wherein she is transformed from a mythological heroine to a folk goddess or local deity. Additionally, this has also given birth to the creation of a cult, manifesting itself in the form of temples dedicated to Draupadi, celebration of Draupadi festivals, and ritual enactment of her life through local rituals and practices. Interestingly, these festivals are very assimilative in sociological terms, as they witness the participation of a lot of people from the lower castes and transsexuals.

The cult of Draupadi is found in different parts of India and South Asia, but mainly in Tamil Nadu, where she is regarded as a form of Devi (goddess) or Sakti (goddess of power and strength). Renowned *Mahabharata* scholar Alf Hiltebeitel has done extensive research on the folkloristic and ritual dimensions of her cult. He has also traced the oldest Draupadi temple to the north of Gingee town built by TubakiKrishnappa, founder of the Nayak line of Gingee kings (1490-1520 CE) (Hiltebeitel 34).
In addition to these cult and dramatic practices, Draupadi has been deeply rooted in other popular cultural expressions of India. The divine feminine associated with Draupadi has retained its synergy with the human feminine, to use Priya Kapoor’s argument in a different, somewhat related context (247). Kapoor has rightly pointed out that within India and South Asia, “the divine and human are easily interchanged in media, in daily conversation, during worship, in the general iconography of the landscape and non-elite artwork such as calendars, hoardings... and so on” (247-48). While Draupadi becomes an inspiration for a lot of women who become victims of sexual violence to speak up and report their suffering and pain, her life becomes exemplary for the practitioners of polyandry in Kinnaur (Himachal Pradesh) and several parts of Southern India. Additionally, Draupadi’s story is also connected to the ritual of fertility and productivity, like Raja Parba, a festival celebrating the onset of menstruation in teenaged girls in Orissa, and several other Himalayan and tribal cultures in India\(^\text{11}\). In addition to the cult of Draupadi, one also comes across the cult of Aravan/Kuttantavar, the son of Draupadi’s companion wife, the snake-princess Ulupi, who is celebrated in a Tamil cult for offering his body in sacrifice to the goddesss Kali and thus enabling the Pandavas to win the war (Hiltebeitel xviii).

The ritualistic and cult practices associated with Draupadi have been a part of centuries-old traditions, and the continued renditions of her story in popular culture are also not new to India and the Indian diaspora, but they acquire greater significance in India in the present century, especially in the wake of new laws for ensuring women’s equality and safety both in the home and the outside world, as well as a parallel increase in crimes against women, especially the Nirbhaya case of 2012\(^\text{12}\).

**Conclusion**

The aforementioned and many other aspects of Draupadi’s narrative have been exalted to metonymic proportions in the Indian cultural life. Draupadi continues to enjoy the status of an icon for young Indian girls and their reclamation of their bodies, their feminine selves, and a gradual shift towards the acceptance and celebration of all its vagaries. On the other hand, Draupadi “is not considered a role model for young women to aspire to... daughters [are] never named in her honor. She remains, essentially, an untamed woman” (Mukhoty 22). This indicates that the work of people rallying for women rights is still incomplete, as one of their most ‘feminist’ icons awaits complete assimilation in the Indian society. This also serves as a reminder of the fact that Draupadi’s question in the *sabha* remains unanswered. This probably accounts for her popularity with artists and writers, who do not tire of putting her character to scrutiny through myriad lenses, often, in the process, bringing her a step closer to appearing more human, realistic, and relatable, rather than a ‘wanton woman’ or a ‘distant feminist’. After all, it is our collective responsibility as a society and as a large world community to ensure the continuance and survival, in fact, thriving and flourishing of popular retellings, surviving cults and flourishing rituals around the figure of the iconic feminist Draupadi. An ancient mythical woman is not long dead: she has only multiplied faces, and is awaiting answers and justice!

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\(^\text{11}\) Kartikeya Patel, in Sharma (2002), p. 65, comments on “the menstruation festival (*raja parva*) of the Goddess *in... Orissa. The participants often point to the story of Draupadi who was disturbed during her menstruation: what followed was a great battle and almost total annihilation of the... Kurus. [Similarly], the disturbance of mother earth’s menstruation period would cause the destruction of crops and other vegetation” (Patel qtd. in McGrath 151).

\(^\text{12}\) The brutal gang rape of Jyoti Singh, a young girl, on the night of December 16\(^\text{th}\), 2012 in Delhi, which eventually led to her death, aroused public ire for months and was also reported widely in the Western media. The case led to the proposal and enforcement of setting up of fast-track courts for settlement of complaints related to violence against women, and arguably bettered the state of gender sensitization in the country.
Re-reading Myths at the Beginning of the Twenty-first Century.

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