

Oral Traditions, Storytelling, and Knowledge Transmission: A Contemporary Analysis of Devdutt Pattanaik's Jaya and Sita

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Abstract: Oral tradition has been shaping Indian story telling for centuries, and has been passing down knowledge and values through voices rather than texts. This paper explores how Devdutt Pattanaik's books Jaya and Sita continues this traditional legacy in the contemporary Indian backdrop. This paper explores and analyse how Devdutt Pattanaik has played an important role in reinterpreting and representing these traditional and mythological texts for a modern readership, offering a fresh re-engagement with our ancient and long-established traditions. The study also highlights his efforts to give voice to the marginalised and to question and even object these orthodox narratives with the introduction of cultural nuance which is often overlooked in mainstream retelling. The study also focuses that how retelling our ancient oral traditional ways of storytelling preserve and propagate ancestral wisdom while intervening it with the contemporary world shaped by new questions and new sensitivities. The paper also argues, that by blending traditional narrative techniques with modern sensibilities, Pattanaik ensures that mythological knowledge remains accessible and relevant, ensuring and highlighting the continued importance and need of oral heritage in contemporary society. Through Jaya and Sita, Pattanaik makes and delivers ancient epics accessible without degrading and diluting their depth. His narrative is conversational yet meaningful, allowing the modern readers to understand the meaning of our epics without understanding or learning Sanskrit, to fit in a modern environment with due respect to our traditions. Ultimately, Jaya and Sita embellish, that how our ancient knowledge can be passed down in respectable and acceptable ways that remains emotionally vibrant, intellectually engaging, and socially relevant, ensuring India's ancient tradition and heritage continues to thrive in this modern world..

Keywords: Oral Tradition, contemporary storytelling, mythological, modern readership, cultural memory, knowledge transmission..

Introduction

Oral tradition is the backbone of India's mythology, traditions, and cultural knowledge.

system, which has helped and supported various communities to pass down various stories, ethics, and traditional beliefs without relying on any form of written texts. India's storytelling tradition is one of the oldest and most vibrant tradition in the world. We live in the 21st century India where stories compete with screens and short attention spans, yet some stories remain timeless and similarly the Indian mythological and traditional narratives are among them. Long before the new narrative technologies or even written manuscripts stories travelled through voices, through rhythmic chants of priests, the voice of wandering bards and the narrations within the household. Because of the oral way of transmitting stories, they were not fixed, and they evolved with each telling as per the narrator including his own take of the story he was presenting. To be more brief Oral storytelling tradition is a way of thinking, remembering, and understanding the world. "*Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth*" as said by Walter J. Ong in his work *Orality and Literacy* (1982), supports this statement that oral traditions are important for our collective consciousness. India's cultural identity has always been deeply connected and are even rooted through our oral traditions, where knowledge is shared and passed down to generations not through any formal written texts, but through voices and collective memory. Devdutt Pattanaik, through his books *Jaya* and *Sita*, brings this old and ancestral form of storytelling style to the modern contemporary setting or backdrop. At the heart of India's cultural and traditional consciousness lies the great epics, The *Mahabharata* and The *Ramayana*, these texts not only depict literary works but they are collection of real-life moral conflicts and dilemmas. The representation of these epics is countless across different cultures, as most of these were transmitted orally rather than in written form, which again makes its multiplicity remarkable. In the contemporary times, digital media, visual representation and shortened attention span have become the biggest rival and limiters opposing the traditional narrative techniques that are now consumed. To be more precise stories have now to compete with screens and algorithms. Pattanaik's works reflect a continuous effort to make Indian mythology accessible to everyone in the modern times, and saving it from becoming a thing of the past. His presentation skills are focusing in connecting the modern reader with our culture, that creates a feeling of belonging and familiarity. Even in the contemporary times his works engage the audiences in such a way that it reminds us that storytelling still has the power to teach, comfort, and connect. Both of his works *Jaya* and *Sita* are able to create a new atmosphere that helps the modern readers to experience the impact and importance of our epics while rediscovering our past and culture, yet in a very easy and accessible way also keeping in mind the cultural, traditional, religious, and social appropriateness. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that how can Pattanaik's works set an example of modernising our past and evolving it without losing its originality and its traditional and religious essence.

By examining these texts, the study aims to demonstrate and proof that oral tradition is not a practice of the past but a dynamic and evolving practice. The paper seeks to explore how Pattanaik's works functions as a modern remaking of India's oral storytelling traditions by examining the narrative techniques employed by him. This paper investigates and analyses Pattanaik's methods in which he has beautifully reinterpreted and represented our oral traditions into a modern and contemporary narrative, keeping traditional knowledge alive and also preserving ancient techniques and narratives making it accessible and emotionally meaningful for modern readers while making space for new perspectives.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative and textual analytical methodology. The primary data consists of Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya* and *Sita*, which are examined through close reading to identify narrative

strategies used to present our Indian mythological epics to the modern readers. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which Pattanaik incorporates different viewpoints, recognises changes in narratives, and connects directly to the reader. The study begins with detailed reading of the primary texts, identifying and understanding key elements such as voices, structure, and the use of cultural commentary. This study also uses comparative analysis with the classical versions of the epics, to trace continuities, similarities, innovations and representations in Pattanaik's retellings. By using a comparative approach by situating retellings alongside with the traditional and classical versions of the epics, including Sanskrit texts and also regional adaptations, the comparison allows and helps in understanding both the continuity and the innovation commenting and appreciating Pattanaik's ability in retaining the essence of the original narratives including the new interpretative layers. Also, through careful reading and understanding, the research observes how the author brings warmth, humour, and clarity into retelling our ancient epics. Since the research is qualitative in nature, it also relies on secondary sources like scholarly articles, mythological commentaries, interviews, and speeches that helps us to understand the cultural and historical meaning behind Pattanaik's work. Thinkers such as Wendy Doninger and AK Ramanujan offers a valuable insight into the plurality of Indian epics and the significance of oral storytelling traditions. "*There is no single Ramayana but many Ramayanas*" as said by Ak Ramanujan in his work *Three Hundred Ramayanas* (1991) provides a layout in supporting the argument of the diversity and plurality of the presentation of the epics. The methodology also recognises the importance of reader perception, and focus on analysis of texts not only as literary works but also as a reflection of cultural practices. A relevant psychological concept for this title is Narrative Identity and Collective Memory, which explains how storytelling and oral traditions influence cultural understanding, personal identity, and the transmission of knowledge across generations. In *Jaya* and *Sita*, mythological reinterpretations serve as psychological narratives that preserve cultural memory, ethical values, and shared social beliefs. Narrative psychology suggests that individuals construct meaning and interpret life experiences through stories, thereby strengthening cultural belonging and self-understanding (McLean et al., 2023; Thomsen et al., 2025). Furthermore, oral storytelling supports autobiographical and collective memory, ensuring the continuity of cultural traditions and societal knowledge across generations. The purpose of this methodology is not only to analyse the texts but to feel the cultural and traditional relevance that they carry through our oral traditions.

Objective

India is a nation with countless stories, and these stories have been travelling not through papers or by any written record, but through people. Moreover, Indian mythological tradition is always based on the human voice, the ability to tell, listen, and ability to pass stories forward from generation to generation. This is the reason why India's stories have been alive across centuries because people remembered, retold, and represented them. Similarly, this study aims to look at how storytelling changes when it moves from a traditional setting into a more written, modern format. In a way these stories were able to live not in books, but in the hearts of people their memories, and everyday conversations, which are continuously evolving yet somehow staying the same. Oral storytelling was always interactive and dynamic which dependent on voice, expression, and the presence of listeners or audience. But when these stories were presented in a manuscript something changed but also something continued. The central theme or aim of this paper is to identify and explore the method which is used by Pattanaik in keeping India's oral storytelling legacy alive through the retelling and representation of *Jaya* and *Sita*, and to study the reach and understanding of the modern readers and listeners, with accordance to our cultural memory. The research tries to understand and comprehend how Pattanaik manages to retain as well as recreate the sense of interaction and liveliness even within

a book. The study focuses on Pattanaik's narrative choices to encourage readers to read, relate, and reconcile with our epics with curiosity and empathy, to generate a renewed sense of reconnection. The paper also seeks to understand and examine the techniques and strategies used by Pattanaik to reinterpret Mahabharata and Ramayana using a modern narrative. Another focus of this research is to understand how explanation becomes a vital part of storytelling in today's changing world, as in earlier times the use of cultural symbols, rituals, and reference was familiarised by the storyteller and the listener. But in the current scenarios the reader is not familiarised by our traditional approach or the way of storytelling and Pattanaik gently addresses this gap by explaining meanings without interrupting the flow of the story. This includes his expertise of representation of the epics, without diluting and degrading the original meaning and also making the stories approachable to worldwide readership. Instead of presenting the stories as fixed or rigid he allows his readers to engage with them as active and dynamic stories with multiple meanings. Through this the study aims to understand and uncover how storytelling style affects the way mythological knowledge is received and understood. His storytelling does not feel unknown or difficult, instead it feels like as someone is narrating and gently explaining things to you, allowing you to have a full control on the temper of the story by pausing, thinking, and connecting emotionally with the story. Pattanaik has also beautifully used the

role of simplicity in powerful storytelling. He used very simple, concise, and clear language instead of academic explanation or complicated language. Using of this simplicity did no effect the quality of the originals, instead it opened a new door for wider audience of the contemporary world. This also means understanding how his writings makes these old stories feels more known, meaningful, and also close even to a person reading them for the very first time. Pattanaik has also reinterpreted character who were traditionally overlooked, or character who have not been given any important relevance in the classical version. This approach allows mythology to move from limited circles and reach readers from different age groups. The paper aims to focus on examining how inclusivity broadens our understanding and aligns with contemporary ethical and cultural awareness. Finally, the research aims to reflect the broader cultural impact of these retellings. By studying how *Jaya* and *Sita* bridges the gap between our ancient tradition and mythology with modernism, plays a significant and important role in shaping identity and values in this generation. Pattanaik's work does more than just retelling or reinterpreting Indian mythology, as it reawakens cultural memory, which had been passed down from ages creating a connection between the past and the present. Another important aspect is the shift in the role of the reader or the audience, as in the traditional narratives, listeners often accepted stories as told by the storyteller, however Pattanaik's narrative encourages the new readers to read and reflect and form their own interpretation of the story, shifting the role of the reader or listener from passive receiver into an active participant. Wendy Doniger in her work *The Hindu: An Alternative History* (2009) presents her opinion that, "*Myths are often retold to suit the needs of the present*" which again strengthens Pattanaik's effort of the new narrative technique. The research aims to explore an understand on how retelling helps the modern reader to find meaning, continuity, and identity within the stories which have been traditionally passed through generations, and also to ensure the relevance of oral traditions in this contemporary, changing, and challenging age. The study also looks at storytelling as a shared cultural experience rather than an individual activity, as Pattanaik's work reminds the readers that they are not just reading a story but they are participating in a long and ongoing tradition.

Case Studies-

'Jaya' and 'Sita'

Jaya is Pattanaik's representation of one of our epics Mahabharata, in a way that is suitable and acceptable for the modern readers. He retells and represent the story of Mahabharata in such a way that it resembles listening to a story which sparks and generate the interest of the listener. The writer does not simply retell the *Mahabharata* but he repositions it as a story that is meant to be explored rather than concluding it. Rather than following the traditional notion of storytelling, Pattanaik treats the epic as a living collection of memories, that have been travelled across different regions, communities, and even centuries. One of the most outstanding aspects of this work is that the way it moves away from a linear and strict narration and instead embraces and promotes multiplicity. This case study explores and examines how *Jaya* helps modern readers to engage with our epic, not only for the purpose of literature but as collective cultural memory. Another important scene is the game of dice between Yudhishtira and Dhuryodhana. Instead of presenting it simply as turning point in the great epic, he explored and analysed deeper cultural and psychological meaning behind it. He depicts that the idea of *dharma* not as a fixed or rigid rule, but a more complex and situational concept. Yudhishtira's actions are shown as a part of a larger moral struggle rather than just purely judging them to be right or wrong. This experiment encourages the perception of the readers to engage with the epic more thoughtfully, reflecting and understanding its ethical complexities rather than jumping into conclusion by making quick judgments. Pattanaik has depicted alternate narratives alongside the main story, because he considers and acknowledge the vast fluidity of the oral recollection of Mahabharata. As Mahabharata does not exist in a single, fixed or rigid form, rather it lives through numerous and countless versions of regional folk and oral remembrance. In a way Pattanaik has woven together many small narratives in a way so that his narration is culturally and traditionally accepted, while is welcomed by the modern readers. A distinctive example of this can be seen in the episode of the humiliation of Draupadi in the royal court, as in many classical retellings this moment is presented as a powerful moral episode that represents injustice and divine protection. But Pattanaik crosses the surface by presenting various interpretations in which some traditions suggest Lord Krishna's divine power in extending her garment, while the other imply that Draupadi's own inner strength protects her dignity. He placed these variation side by side as he does not want to impose a single truth but he allows his readers to reflect on the deeper meaning of faith, choice, and honour. Finally, the study focuses to reflect the larger significance of these representing and retelling for the contemporary world. *Jaya* is not a simple presentation of the Mahabharata, it provides a new and modern narrative with warmth, diverseness, and directness that defines the epic's oral origins. It invites the readers to experience Mahabharata from a new perspective, which remains respectful to the epic's philosophical foundations. He has also given attention to the less discussed characters as Shikhandi, as in traditional narratives she appears as a secondary character, but in *Jaya* Pattanaik brings her forward as a character with complex identity, who is born as Shikhandini and later living as Shikhandi. This inclusion opens the discussion about gender fluidity and identity which strongly resonated with contemporary readers, depicting that how oral traditions have always held space for diverse identities. If we take another example of Bishma lying on the bed of arrows we can see how Pattanaik does not present this scene as a heroic sacrifice but a moment of regret and reflection. Bishma's prolonged death becomes symbolic of the weight of vows and consequences of rigid loyalty towards his duties. Pattanaik invites the reader to think about whether loyalty to promises may sometime lead to suffering not only for oneself but for others as well.

On the other hand, Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita* offers and represent our second epic the Ramayana in a very refreshing and engaging way. He uses an unusual narrative to present Ramayana, as he shifts the frame of reference from a grand heroic narrative to a more grounded and culturally layered interpretation. The forest exile '*vanvas*' is completely portrayed differently by focusing only on Rama's

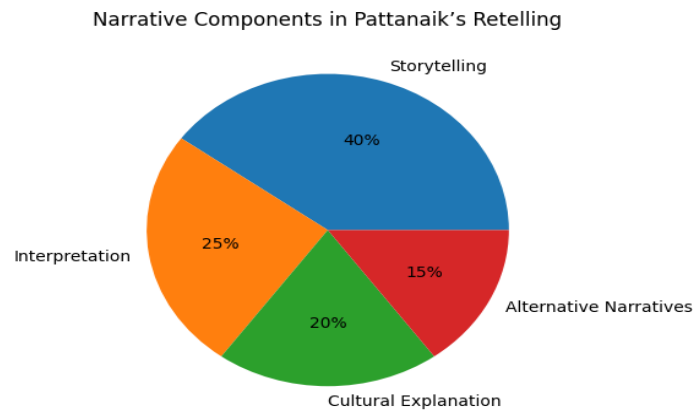
sense of duty, Pattanaik sheds a light on the emotional side of the exile too. He talks about the uncertainty, the need to adjust to a new lifestyle, and the new relation that takes place in the forest. These new and organic approach reflects how oral tradition often gives importance to lived experiences and cultivating everyday emotions, rather than only focusing on the major and highlighted events. One of the most significant reinterpretations appears in the episode in which Sita was exiled known as the 'Agni Pariksha', which later lead to her banishment too. In the traditional narration this reading is often presented as a test of purity as Sita was taken away from Rama for a long time, therefore this action of Rama was depicted as a duty-bound decision, however Pattanaik has shifted the focus from judgment to understanding. Through his new approach of reinterpretation, he allows the readers to question rather than accept. Presented in various narrations by different communities as injustice and sacrifice shaped by societal expectation by others. Before the 'Agni Pariksha' one major moment which leads to this situation is again strongly represented by Pattanaik, humanising the abduction of Sita by Ravana. He highlights her awareness and resilience instead of showing her as a passive victim. He depicts that how in various narrations of *Ramayana*, she refuses Ravana not out of fear but out of strong conviction and strength. He shifts the readers perception from pity to outmost respect, allowing Sita to emerge as an active centre of his narrative. This case study looks at how Pattanaik has reintroduced this epic that feels closer to what it was experienced before to a more modern interpretation. This new narrative breaks the epic into small ideas, reflections, and contextual explanation that captures the way how communities encountered *Ramayana* in domestic and rural settings. This structure helped and allows the reader to reconnect, reinterpret, and reconcile with the actual meanings rather than viewing the epic fixed, rigid, or imposing. This interpretation recreates the experience of listening to a storyteller, who ensures the listener to understand the world behind them. Another important aspect of *Ramayana* is that it has countless variation, and therefore Pattanaik acknowledges and understands the diverseness, and reminds the reader through his presentation that the *Ramayana* is a living tradition shaped by centuries and generation of oral retellings. The book also puts strong emphases on cultural interpretation, explaining the significance of rituals, the meaning of symbols, and the cultural depth which is embedded in the epic's world. The case study argues that the success of *Sita* lies in the ability to keep the *Ramayana* relevant without altering its core. Its presentation leaves an open space for questions, readings, and personal involvement, by doing so Pattanaik recreates the atmosphere of oral storytelling, where each reader understands from a different understanding. *Ramayana* is deeply personal, so it needs to be represented with accuracy towards our culture and tradition. *Sita* helps in preserving the epic to be more than literature, it presents our epic to be a shared cultural memory that remains meaningful in the modern contemporary world. While reading *Jaya* and *Sita* together we can see a pattern that is used by Pattanaik. He is not trying to modernise mythology by changing it for the contemporary world, rather he is revealing what was always present but often overlooked because the attention was only paid to the highlighted scenarios. Both texts shows that mythology is not a closed system of fixed and stagnant meaning, instead it is a living process of storytelling that adapts and morphs with time. By bringing this quality into his writing he ensures these epics remain relevant without losing its cultural, traditional, religious and social essence.

This chart visually represents the distribution of key narrative elements in Pattanaik's retelling. It highlights how storytelling remains dominant, while interpretation, cultural explanation, and alternative narratives collectively contribute to making the texts accessible and meaningful for contemporary readers.

Conclusion

Oral Traditions, Storytelling, and Knowledge
Transmission: A Contemporary Analysis of
Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya* and *Sita*

This research highlights how Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya* and *Sita* renew and reignite the relationship between modern readers and the ancient Indian narrative traditions. In addition, it also brings forward an important understanding that storytelling is not only about preserving tradition but also making it more meaningful for the presentation. It provides a deeper and sensitive representation of our epics rather than a cliché reinterpretation of our epics, and it acts as a bridge to connect modern reader with the past that is shaped by collective memory, oral storytelling, and traditional imagination. Through *Jaya* and *Sita*, Devdutt Pattanaik is able to demonstrate and explain that how stories survive not only because they remain unchanged and original, but because they are active and dynamic which are retold in different ways in which people can relate to in their own time with a feeling of familiarity. Although, as we all know that these epics were carried through oral traditions and shared experiences but Pattanaik shows how he narrated the retelling without diminishing and degrading the original essence of the story, and in a similar fashion he proves how these ancient tradition and culture can be preserved even within the format of contemporary writing. The other insight that emerges from this study is the idea that meaning in mythology is never singular, and there are different interpretations that coexist adding something new to the story every time it is read. This openness not only reflects the spirit of oral traditions but also encourages a more thoughtful and accepting approach towards cultural narrative. The retellings contribute to a sense of continuity in a rapidly changing world, at a time when traditional practices are deemed outdated, making storytelling a way of holding onto our cultural roots without resisting change. Pattanaik shows that traditions does not need rigidity for protection and survival, instead it can be beautifully sustained by allowing it to grow and evolve naturally. His narrative is modern and is accepted by the new readers easily which suits their taste, as he has presented his work to be more active, with the possibilities of various viewpoints and understandings which provides a more sensible and deeper connection of recollection to the modern readers with our past. His narrations slow down the pace offering interpretative notes, which is capable to speak to different generations in different way, which resembles the role of traditional storyteller who in fact guides the listeners to understand meaning of our epics without making them confuse. Furthermore, the research points out another remarkable factor of Pattanaik's storytelling is the acceptance and acknowledgement of the epics. Both of his works presents that these stories have been told in many ways, many voices, across different regions and generations. This point proves that mythology is dynamic and active in nature that evolves through generation, rather than being rigid, fixed, or having only a fixed meaning. Observing this heterogeneity permits the readers to see the epics not as fixed or rigid, but are ongoing conversations. In broader context this research concludes the importance of Pattanaik's narrative to serve as a meaningful reminder of why mythology continues to matter. The study concludes that his works keeps India's mythological tradition alive, without letting them slip. His work ensures that these stories continue to be shared, discusses, and remembered keeping them alive in both thought and experience. By presenting these epics in a more modern narrative with warmth, thoughtfulness, and inclusiveness he ensures that these stories continue to travel as they have been from generations to generations. In conclusion, the research establishes that mythology continues to matter because it continues to speak. As long as stories are narrated, transformed, and reinterpreted they remain alive. The study reinforces the idea that oral traditions are not disappearing as they are transforming and evolving. It is because of our oral traditions that we as a society reconnect with our past to understand our traditions. Maurice Halbwachs in her work *On Collective Memory* (1992) expresses her opinion by saying that, "*It is in society that people normally acquire their memories*" Through intellectual writers like Pattanaik, the essence of oral storytelling finds a new form of written narratives that still carry the same warmth, flexibility, and depth. By doing so he makes mythology as a living heritage, carried forward with the same cultural and traditional essence and depth to be sustained and carried forward through centuries of oral tradition.



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