

The Historical Development of Mythology and its Relevance in Literature

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Abstract

Myths have attracted almost all the major English poets, from Chaucer to the present. Mythology allows taking a journey into an exciting and mysterious world. In the first place, myths are stories. In every culture and every country, during every period of time, people have told stories. There are sacred stories handed down as a part of religions, as well as legends that explain and define the great acts of nations and peoples. Throughout history we find stories, riddles, proverbs and fables for adults as well as children. Some of these stories educate, some mystify. All are meant to entertain. It is an inseparable part of literature thus. Now and then every literature uses myths. Thus the proper study of the origin of myth is highly alluring. Keep this in mind, the research paper analyses the origin, growth and development of myths in literature.

Key words: Literature, English poet, myth, story, Archaic Myth, Etiological Myth, Ritual Myth, Heroic Myth, Soteriological Myth, Prophetic Myth

“Myth” is derived from the Greek “Muthos” which originally meant an oral communication, a tale or story of any kind or description. At a later stage, however, the word deteriorated in meaning and was applied to a fabulous or fictitious tale, marked by an extravagant play

of fancy. But, in its final phase, the word acquired a stricter and more specific connotation and came to be identified with a story or narrative in which Gods or natural agencies played the main part. H.A.Murray says: "Myths are symbolic answers to questions raised by man's curiosity about causes: for e.g., 'the thunder must be the voice of Zeus'" (Murray 105) Definitions of myth can vary but the theorizers agree that myth is non-rational. The roots of ancient myths are hidden in the depth of unrecorded times. No historical imagination, however, brilliant and remarkable it may be, can enable to justify with certainty, the circumstance and conditions connected with their birth, growth and expansion.

These myths were created by primitive communities, which lived, moved and worked in close companionship with the phenomena and forces of nature, and felt their impact constantly and acutely on the conditions of their daily existence and physical well-being. It is pertinent to recall here the words of Prof. and Mrs. Henri Frankfort concerning the primitive man's attitude towards the external world:

The fundamental difference between the attitude of modern and ancient man as regards the surrounding world is this: "for modern scientific man the phenomenal world is primarily an 'It', for ancient and primitive man it is a 'thou'. Primitive man simply does not know an inanimate world. In this highly personal world events must be seen in personal terms. So, to the primitive, nothing can be rationally defined; therefore, several explanations of myths concerning natural phenomena could exist and be believed at the same time (Skelton 37-38) .

The primitive human society, thus, is marked by the interpenetration of man with the surrounding world and these results in the birth of magic, myth and religion, with their peculiar rituals and ceremonies. It represents the first attempt of the primitive man towards the giving of imaginative shape and significance to the totality of his experience. On the basis of separate cultural grounds myth has been divided into four major forms by few theorizers.

I. Archaic Myth:

Archaic myth or the primitive myth has its root into non-literate tribal society of nomads. This myth is usually crude, naïve and awkward. But it is believed as a sacred and genuine material. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, from Mesopotamia is based upon archaic myth.

Intermediate myth is founded completely upon archaic myth, but it is skillfully handled by highly conscious writers in a literate era. In the hands of a master like Ovid myth becomes a good story. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides treated the mythological themes as a means of probing the basic characters of god and man, and of the relationships between the divine and the human.

Derivative myth does not focus on any sacred past. Its primary concerns are aesthetic and secular. Though the foundation for derivative myth is essentially intermediate myth, but in derivative myth there is complete liberty for any treatment. This myth is not genuine but derivation which is further modified into narrative fiction set in contemporary or future surroundings. Like in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* there is unrecognizable modification of an ancient theme. Derivative myth is considered to be the major supplier of myth today. The dramatizations of Troy and other classical mythology through cinema have brought modern man closer to myths in a new way. Tarzan and Superman who are Hercules of the twentieth century can be quoted as an example.

Mythical notions and mythical concepts continue to control behavior. The assumption of the women as "weaker sex" is ideological myth, to which even the modern man strictly believes.

Myths have some peculiar characteristics. Myth is not the idiosyncratic idea of an individual but has a larger and more general acceptance. Myth cannot be proved objectively but they are related to man's intuitive part of his dreams, aspirations, fears and hopes which are universal. Every myth is truly symbolic which represents psychic and spiritual reality as against external reality. Myth is believed as a sacred material and a genuine truth. Myth is narrative. The tellers of Intermediate myth and Derivative myth have tried to narrate the archaic myth in their own contemporary settings. The setting for a myth is timeless. The tribes ascribe their myths to the days of "the old ones", "the elders", "and the grandfathers" or of some distant past. They always mean a long, long time ago. For prophetic and eschatological myth, the setting is sometimes in future. In myths the deities are not only the central figures, but also have highly respected supernatural powers. Such as the heroic accounts of Ulysses. Myth provides valuable knowledge and guidance. Through stories it preaches the way of God to man. Myth is believed with profound

intensity. It is the burning conviction of the teller and the listener. As far as the mythical topics are concerned they are as follows:

1. Etiological Myth:

These are those myths that try to explain the creation of the world. The activities of the deities are also related to etiological myth because the deities are the cause of human life.

2. Ritual Myth:

Much of the English speaking world faithfully reads the biblical account of the nativity. “Christmas Carol” is the celebration of Christmas. Such a practice, combining a rite with a narrative, produces ritual myth.

3. Heroic Myth:

All of us bask in reflected glory by recounting the superlative deeds of ancestors and supposed relatives, or the magnificent accomplishments by past notables of our tribe, community, or nation. Homer has mentioned numerous places and people in the *Iliad*.

4. Soteriological Myth:

This myth is the myth of saving. It is reassuring to have some divine assistance to rescue us from disaster and failure. Stereological myth is explicitly or implicitly supernatural. The Trojan horse, which gave victory to the Greeks after a decade of frustration, falls in this group.

5. Prophetic Myth:

Prophetic myths achieve the most hypnotic effect upon the listeners. It is an external vision. The prophets of old Israel constitute the most impressive group of such visionaries—Jeremiah, Ezekeil, David and many others.

Myth and legend sound alike. But there is a difference between them. The difference between legend and myth is that legend tells of military and spiritual heroes in past, not the remote past of myth:

Legend, saga, epic, heroic tale proclaim that in former days they were men but indubitably, they were far stronger, more valiant, more intelligent, more moral, more everything commendable, than the mundane fellows of this era (Martin 9).

Moreover, Gods are the central characters of myth, men the central figures of legends. Myth is an indispensable part of art and literature. Beautiful as tales, the myths have constituted for modern poets a kind of poetic shorthand of infinite imaginative and emotional value. For

the poet, myths still contain valuable materials and symbols, which a poet can charge with new meaning and vitality in his works. "In summing up the value of myth and legend, the statement may be made that these have a permanent value for poetry and will continue to have" (Reid 260).

In the 19th Century there was a revival of the Hellenic spirit and almost all the romantic poets were influenced by it. The reason of this love for the distant past was their disenchantment with the present. All these romantic poets gave their own subjective interpretation of myths. Among the Romantic poets William Wordsworth was the first to revive Hellenism which was quite dead in the Augustan age.

Shelley is one of the greatest myth-makers in English literature. His love for liberty awakened in him a passion for Greece and Rome. "Orpheus", "Adonis", "Hellas", "Oedipus Tyrannous", "Prometheus Unbound", "The Witch of Atlas", "Euganean Hills", "Arethusa", "The Hymn of Apollo", "The Hymn of Pan", "Cyclops of Euripides", "Hymn to Mercury", are all written on Greek themes.

Greek mythology provided Keats with a happy medium through which he could express the beauties of nature. "Endymion", "Lamia", "Ode on a Grecian Urn", "Ode to Psyche", the two "Hyperion" poems, "Ode to Apollo", "Apollo to the Graces" are all based on Greek mythology. Thus all these romantic poets used Greek mythology to express their personal ideas.

Noteworthy fact is here that mostly poets and writers have employed this technique. It also became interesting to speculate that for what reason writers have always been drawn towards this employment; simply we can answer that it is due to their quality of timelessness and antiquity. Myths are old far off distant things. They are purely traditional. They are embodying popular ideas on natural phenomena. Naturally, they lend enchantment and charm to the modern generation and modern writers.

The spell and attraction towards Indian mythological stories have a kind of fundamental significance. Their distance from contemporary reality countless. Indian writers particularly—M.R. Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao—are aware of Indian mythologies and surprisingly enough they have created the myths with all their literary possibilities. Another reason for the employment of myths is that they, along with folk-tales and ancient legends, provide abstract

story pattern. The fact is that the writers derive patterns of stories or contents of stories or essential principles of storytelling from these legends and folk-tales.

Another factor which is responsible for the existence and employment of myths is their “Literary nature”. It may be a point of objection but as literature has shown its favor we can say that poets and writers are attracted towards myths because of their literariness or because they are literary. Myth is ethical, philosophical, religious and cultural. Indian myths are essential part of the nature and spirit of literature.

Here it becomes necessary for us to point out that many trends and movements in Indian literature have been derivative in nature, sometimes they have been imitative either consciously or unconsciously. Most of the literary trends in India have found their root and foundation in Europe. In this reference we can notice existential movement in Bengali fiction in the sixties, which is inspired by the contemporary existential in Europe. It is also a glaring fact that the primary cause of disillusionment in India is different from that of the western literature. The despair and disillusionment of western literature is of an intellectual and spiritual origin, whereas the disillusionment of Indian literature leading to frustration and futility is generated out of the instability and inability or getting its minimum needs of living—the needs of food, shelter and clothing etc. These two are totally different experiences and therefore, produced different types of literature. Just as most European trends have found their echoes in India, the western writers concerned with myths was bound to be reflected in the Indian literature.

Unfortunately, in the case of Indian English literature direct derivation is not possible because Indian English writer has to face peculiar difficulties. He can execute the stream of consciousness technique in his work, he can get benefit from the technical experiments of the European literary artist. An Indian English novelist is free to make any kind of experiment without facing any difficulty.

This becomes a great difficulty which an Indian writer has to face. It becomes like a more creative challenge to him because he had to turn to the mythology of his own culture to create significant patterns of fiction. But for an Indian English writer, it becomes easier because people of India are close to mythologies. Indian people are

deeply conscious of their culture—their rich past. They still grew up absorbing the myths and legends of the country. In India it is like a custom to recite the mythological stories to the children due to this reason along with their growth, naturally they develop a powerful fascination to this golden treasury of myths. The public recitation of tales from *The Ramayan*, *The Mahabharat* and the *Puranas*, pointing out its contemporary relevance is now a living tradition. The influence of the Indian epics in our national life is significant and dominating and so far-reaching that it a world view is required to make literature profitable and meaningful in terms of shared human experiences, they can offer a widely accepted basis of such a common and general background, which permits the collective consciousness of the whole nation. The epics and the puranas are among few common links which constitute an all India frame reference. Thus due to this employment and fusion of myths and legends with the contemporary reality we can state that Indo-Anglian writing has its roots in India. The writings are constantly attractive towards the rich material.

As we observe that the conscious use of myth is a technique adopted in India English fiction for enhancing the effect of a contemporary situation. Both thematically and technically the use of myth so far has been successful and the Indian epics offer the basis of common background which permeates the collective unconscious of the whole nation. The myths chosen in the novel are part of an established literary convection and do not show any unusual insight in the part of the author in perceiving links between the present situation and its parallel situation; yet on the whole of experiments have been varied enough and the methods of execution diverse enough to make the study rewarding. Reflecting on the utility of the use of mythical reference in Indo-Anglian novel, Meenakshi Kukherjee observes:

Since most of these myths are part of the heritage of all the Indians regardless of their language. Using myth as symbol for the Indo-Anglian novelist is an excellent artistic solution of the problems arising out of the heterogeneity of his audience. The contemporary novelist is preoccupied with the idea of expressing the “Whole of Modern Life”. In undertaking such a fact, James Joyce turned out the traditional frame work of the “Odyssey” in which he could work and achieve a ‘Vital Connection’ between the demands of individual creative personality and the influence of the total European literary tradition.

For Indian writers a preoccupation with the Radha Krishna legend or an allegory based on Draupadi's choice of husbands could provide a similar vital connection. The violence before and after the partition becomes the reenacting of the Kurukshetra fratricide (Mukherjee 32).

In Indian English fiction myths have been used mainly in two ways. M.R. Anand and R.K. Narayan and others have used myths as a structural parallel where a mythical situation underlies the whole or part of a novel, whereas, Raja Rao has used myth as a part of a digressional technique and in this sphere he has excelled all others. Here he weaves a variety of legends and myths and folk-tales into the fabric of his novel to attain some desired effect.

The method of using myth as a structural parallel is sometimes used as consistently throughout a novel as in Narayan's *The Man-eater of Malgudi* or Anand's *Old Woman and the Cow*. But almost in all the cases it is done in a fragmentary way, illuminating a character here or enriching a situation there.

India, in spite of her variety and complexity, is a cultural unit; she has an image of her own culture. Culture is an exploratory term which means the sum total of all i.e.—reflected in the mode of life of people—their thought processes and outlook on life, social structures, values and customs, their needs, aims, aspirations and national commitment and then this is best expressed through the arts and letters of the country. It may be said that the adequately the special of the cultural life of that age, is sure to be of interest to a later age reflecting an equally complex pattern of life.

As it happens, an Indo-English novelist is preoccupied with the idea of expressing the "Whole of modern life". In this use of myths and legends, for example, he considers them as a part of heritage of all Indians. This use of myth as symbol for the Indian English novelist is an excellent artistic solution of the problems arising out of the heterogeneity of audience.

The word 'myth' has been constantly used in the literature of the world. This term is also used in a variety of meanings in sociology, anthropology, psychology and in comparative religion—each field of study investing it with different connotations. But its use in literature is much more comprehensive.

Before we see the use of myth as a technique adopted by Indian English writers for enhancing the effect of a contemporary

situation, we must make a comprehensive analysis and unconscious use of myth.

In literature there are mainly two ways in which myths are used. As far as the conscious use of the myth is concerned it became a popular literary device and also became a part of modern trend. This method is used by T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, by James Joyce in *Ulysses* by E. M. Forster in “A Passage to India” and by O’Neill in *Mourning Becomes Electra* etc. Though there is vast difference in thesis techniques and intentions but there is one common element in their diverse methods. Each of them uses mythical or classical situations or characters in a modern context, thereby, seeking to illuminate the predicament of contemporary man, viewing his in a larger perspective of time. The uninitiated reader reads the narrative for the sake of pleasure but when mythical or classical parallel is recognized, the response of reader to the work is enriched by an element of recognition. Now the conscious use of myth becomes a very familiar and more popular technical device used by many writers.

In the second case, here is unconscious use of myth. In this technique we find that writers may not have been using a mythical situation or character but, readers or critics have discovered the unconscious way in which myth have operated in their novels or dramas, for example, we can take ‘Hamlet’ in which Gilbert Murray traced to a primitive myth connected with the ritual battle between summer and winter, of life and death.

The kind of archetypal criticism, claiming descent from Jung’s theory that modern man preserves, though unconsciously, those prehistoric areas of experience which is interpreted in myths, is undoubtedly, a fruitful and fascinating approach to literature.

But as we have to see the use of myth in reference of Indian English writers who made the use of conscious myth mostly as part of their technique. It is considered that not only the myths used by Indian English writers from the story of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas—but also from the local legends, folklore, as well as primitive rituals—like the ritual for rain, for harvest or fertility and similar other sources in order to add to the novel of M.R. Anand R.k. Narayan and Raja Rao—a special colour of mythical patterns because it becomes a part of our cultural pattern, our ideas of aspirations that may or may not have any basis in the actual conduct of real human beings.

A potent myth appeals the imagination of the reader. It directly goes to the heart, not to head or reason. A myth is useful in the context of modern time only when it illuminates the present predicament of human society or suggestive of curable effect or it can suggest a remedy. They are meant more for inspiration than for information. They are like religious rituals which make life meaningful and enrich it by penetrating to its essence. A myth is not a substitute for reality but only a vehicle for a better appreciation of reality.

There are three different ways for using myths:

- (a) As a part of digressional technique.
- (b) As a device to illuminate a character or a situation.
- (c) As a total structural pattern.

Here we should not forget the fact in reference to the first way of using myth that mere weaving myths and legends in the fabric of the story will not provide a novel any special stature unless there is an underlying design holding all the digressions together. The second is artistically more vivid. A myth crystallizes a universal situation in a story which is independent of time and place, and, therefore, a contemporary situation gains extension backwards in the history of mankind if it can be related to myth.

In third device the whole story is woven round a single myth or ritual. For example in R.k. Narayan's *The Guide*, the climax hinges on a ritual for rain. There is a very faint suggestion that rain do come.

In the novel, both myth and realism are inter connected. Realism in the novel has been defined in various ways. Some scholars call it the fidelity observed in the transcription of life as it is. It can be defined as verisimilitude to life also because literal transcription of life is well—nigh impossible. So it would be more proper for us to record it as a plausible interpretation of life.

The influence of Mahatma Gandhi gradually crystallized into more of a symbol even myth for India's cultural resurgence than a mere political force. It has transformed the individual lives of Lal singh or Sriram and Sanad Shivpal, but has now a choric character in Raja Rao's 'Kanthapura'. Though the mode is intensified and symbolic it remains as its care, a realistic epic of an Indian village responding passionately to the pervasive movement of Swaraj. The novel retains a cohesive structural unity despite the various layers of social.

Political religious metaphysical and mythical ideas that coalesce into the story. The unifying threads are symbolic mode and the structure is mythical device.

In Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, myth has been very brilliantly and elegantly used. The myth of Ram and Rawan war and the gospel of Lord Krishna are not meant to make an one-to-one correspondence with the winning of freedom of India, but to enhance the experience of the novel and to deepen the reader's awareness of it. India is protected by the Goddess Kenchamma. Kanthapura, the village, the microcosmic Moorthy, the "Gandhi Man", initiates and gradually plunges the placid village into process of revolution. Moorthy electrified by the vision of Mahatma, is thoroughly absorbed in his message of Truth, and there is only one love in life that of the love is mankind, and there is but one God in life and that is the God of all. Though the village is reduced to stable but the spirit does not extinguish out and the hope persists that the Mahatma will bring Swaraj.

Raja Rao himself intends to be a "Sthala Purana", Iyengar considers it to be a "Gandhi Purana" and Mr. A. V. Krishna Rao states it to be as a "jagat Purana"—thus we find that the whole novel is a superb embodiment of Indian life, myth and ethos and heritage of Indian life. It is a story of the past of India present and its future also apprehended in the collective consciousness of rustics.

Myth, as we saw, often results from the poetic condensation of actual historical events is an important part of literature. In sum, ancient myth generally has been rediscovered by writers, artists, and in its illuminating capacity both as a mirror of the modern world and as a projection of the individual psyche.

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