

Approaching the Present through the Lens of the Past: Use of Myth and Folklore

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Abstract

Falling on myth, legend and folklore for one's theme is not an ordinary feat; it requires careful and comprehensive research and brainstorming analysis in order to match the history or the mythical fact with the issue at hand. Further, making humans out of gods entails immense hard work and dedication. Besides, the real talent of the writer lies in moulding the myth which is apparently common to all the writers, according to the purpose in focus. Literature based on mythology is often connected with historical truths, albeit with facts that are not always and easily verifiable. More often than not, writers draw from mythology in order to reclaim the past and also to challenge its historicity occasionally. In the domain of Indian writing in English, there are countless examples of Indian writers, both writing in India or elsewhere who make use of mythology to serve their targets as fiction writers. The present paper reviews the use of mythology by some Indian writers and also analyses how a common mythological text is used in divergent ways by multiple writers. Starting from Raja Raju, the paper moves through Girish Karnad and Shashi Tharoor down to the contemporary writers like Dr. Devdutt, Kalyan Rao and Kavita Kané. Though the primary focus of this paper is on the epics texts like Mahabharata and Ramayana, yet some marginal mythological texts rooted in Southern India are also taken into account. Besides, the paper also takes into consideration retelling of Indian myths through the perspective of Indian women writers.

Keywords : Historiography; Indian Writing; Mythology; Re-imagination; Religion.

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines myth as, "A traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or

events." There are two terms in this definition that warrant attention; tradition and history. The connection of myth with tradition and history supplies a substantial amount of inseparableness and intimacy of myth with the place, the community, the culture and the people in which the myth is rooted. In fact, there are instances in which many societies go to the extent of putting their faith in myths and legends to the extent of considering them as true and just account of their otherwise remote past. By grouping them together, they juxtapose their myths and legends with the historical past. Having said that, a myth can't be taken as the true account of history, in fact, calling something a myth necessarily implies the fictitious and make-believe nature of the story. It cannot be gainsaid that myths have a deep connection with traditions associated with religion that are generally spiritual in nature and also with the associated cults and rituals. In this context, a folklorist from Finland, Lauri Honko has a very comprehensive definition of myth to offer, which states:

"Myth, a story of the gods, a religious account of the beginning of the world, the creation, fundamental events, the exemplary deeds of the gods as a result of which the world, nature and culture were created together with all parts thereof and given their order, which still obtains. A myth expresses and confirms society's religious values and norms, it provides a pattern of behaviour to be imitated, testifies to the efficacy of ritual with its practical ends and establishes the sanctity of cult." (49)

Myths are dynamic in nature because they have come down to the reader through the oral tradition. The original myth then is subjected to multiple perspectives and situations, changing it with the need and the demand of the reader and the situation at hand. Therefore, as the mythical story spreads between cultures or as there is a change in faith, myths too adapt accordingly. Similarly, there are instances in which, over a period of time, certain historical as well as literary material acquires attributes that are otherwise mythological in spirit and nature. Interestingly, the word, myth has a history of pejorative use as well when it was and still is used to dub the religious and cultural beliefs and the associated cults and rituals of other cultures and religions as made up and untrue. Nevertheless, the study of myths in general is done by the branch of study commonly called as mythology. It also undertakes the study of a corpus of myths united by a subject having a common attraction. For instance, Greek mythology, Roman mythology, Hindu Mythology, Christian mythology, Jewish mythology and many such mythological texts are grouped under one head because they point at a common idea.

Myth belongs to the genre of folklore. It consists of foundational narratives or stories of a society and its people. Myths are usually peopled by supernatural beings, gods and demigods. Closely linked to the genre of myths is the genre of legends that revolve round the stories of everyday human beings, mostly some kind of leaders. If we attempt tracing the origin of myths, we may end up tracing the history of human existence itself because myths are as old as thinking about stories and human thought itself. Freud's comment on myth as "the great primordial truth, the precipitate of the unconscious" (*qtd.* in Sankaran 1) aptly fits here.

The idea of the unconscious and the terms associated with it are beyond the domains of proper rational thinking and verifiability. However, humans have always exhibited an intense predisposition towards making some sense out of the world order and their own actions. In other words, curiosity has had a huge role to play in pushing the cultures and civilizations forward. Myths have come handy in filling and fitting themselves in the gaps where rational explanation refuses to fit in. Explaining myth in such roles, Elina Helander-Renvall comments,

"Regardless of how we define myths, the myths are available to us. In their daily lives, people often search for explanations for their existence and identity, for the origins of their activities, for the plans of gods and for certain truths to emerge. Myths are able to give answers that modern knowledge system cannot afford to give. In post-modern times and beyond, myths help to stretch the boundaries of prevailing worldviews and modes of thought." (57)

Rooted in the tradition of oral narration, myths have been a great resource for the ancient performers and the subsequent writers of literature and they continue to suffuse literary works with content and ideas. For instance, English works draw immensely from Roman and Greek myths which though were not originally available in English. Since myths are a power house of meaning, writers use them either directly or allude to them so as to add meaning to their own content. In other words, to literature, myth serves the purpose of both metaphor and allegory. Wide range of writers like Shakespeare, Milton, Yeats, Eliot, Kafka, Golding, Lawrence, Joyce allude to ancient myths in order to express the problems and conflicts surrounding their characters or the times they inhabit and also to find some semblance of a resolution at the end. In "Mythe/Myth," a paper written by Joseph Strelka from the New York State University, Albany, suggests, "Many literary works serve as excellent examples of the revitalization of myth. No less worthy of note, it is often myth that gives power

and vitality to some of the greatest works of literature.”

Many writers make use of comparative mythology in order to systematically compare myths of different cultures. The aim is to seek the common thread underlying divergent cultures. Similarly, many writers seek to interpret the present mythically by drawing comparisons with the existing myths by way of juxtaposing the two. There are instances when writers have resorted to myth and folklore in order to detach themselves from the present in order to come to terms with their past.

T.S. Eliot’s ground breaking poem, *The Waste Land* is a pastiche of myths. Eliot weaves Biblical, European, Hindu and other mythologies to voice the *angst* brought about by modernism. The mythical method supplied him with a feasible apparatus to capture and then express the complexity, confusion and chaos embedded in the modern life. Yeats’ poetry is replete with examples of Gaelic and Christian mythology, Milton draws from Biblical mythology and Shakespeare is heavily loaded with Greek and Roman mythology.

In the Indian sensibility, myth, religion and history go hand in hand. Therefore, myth and legend are a part and parcel of Indian ethos. V.S. Naipaul observes:

“Religious myths touched every part of the land ... story within story, fable within fable: that was what people saw and felt in their bones. Those were the myths, about gods and heroes of the epics, that gave antiquity and wonder to the earth and people lived on.” (35)

Partha Chatterjee also points out,

“Myth, history, and the contemporary – all become part of the same chronological sequence; one is not distinguished from another; the passage from one to another, consequently, is entirely unproblematical.” (80)

The Indian writers, particularly the postcolonial prose and fiction writers in English draw extensively from Indian myths and legends in order to put life and blood in their works. Girish Karnad’s plays like *Yayati*, *Hayavadan*, *Nagamandala*, *Fire and Rain* and Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope*, for example, rely for sustenance on myths in order to cash on such appeals and attributes of myth that are emotive, figurative, historical and also sym-

bolical in nature. In fact, a number of Indian writers like Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Vikram Chandra, Amish Tripathi, Amitav Ghosh, Ashwin Sanghi, Devdutt Pattnaik and many other diasporic writers of Indian origin writing popular fiction have explored and made use of Indian mythology and legends in their works. Indian writers writing in English rarely explore the myths and legends that their European counterparts draw from and there is a reason to it. In comparison to the Western writers, Indian writers are more close to the myths originating from their own land. In the words of Meenakshi Mukherjee, they "are still closer to their mythology than the modern Irish or British people who are to Celtic folk-lore or Greek legends." (38) She proposes two primary ways in which Indian English fiction relies on some mythical material; "as a part of a digressional technique of which Raja Rao is the most outstanding exponent and as structural parallels, where a mythical situation underlines the whole or a part of a novel." (41) As far as Raja Rao is concerned, he makes the 'digressional' use of myth in his novels like *Kanthapura* (1938), *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) and *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965). Rushdie, Anita Desai and others on the other hand employ myth to make some sense of the modern day chaos thereby juxtaposing past over present to understand it. In either of the two cases, it seems then, writers engaged in drawing on myth and folklore are more interested in their past rather than their future. They rely heavily on the mythical past which they visualize as a headspring of great imaginative and creative energy in which they see huge potential to shape their political aspirations and destinies. Moreover, unlike future which is uncertain and unpredictable, myths offer a platform which is substantial having a backing of a lived experience that is clear about what could be the consequences of something with a substantial degree of certainty. The range is extensive, that is be it the problems of governance, issues of power and justice or the ideas concerning the ideal society and its ruler or it may be the dynamics that govern the interaction of gender with society, myths present wide ranging instances and specimens.

Broadly speaking, *The Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are two major Indian epics, in the Indian socio-literary arena that have spawned innumerable retellings and re-imaginings. These epics focus on men in general but more specifically they revolve round the life of royal men and the wars they get engaged in. Writers also rely for their themes on *Vedas*, *Upanishad* and various Buddhist scriptures. Similarly, there are some epics written in Tamil language like *Silappatikaram* and *Manimekalai* that also feature the life and problems of royal men like princes and kings and are also more or less pre-occupied with the issues related to governance, politics and power. However, the difference lies in the fact that these are not centered

exclusively on men; they feature ordinary women as well in the central roles.

In the current Indian literary scenario, mythological thrillers today, are very popular. In fact, they have become a genre of their own making, with many writers giving wings, and words, to their imagination through the use of myth. These writers use myths either to evoke patriotic feelings or to generate humour and satire to criticize certain social norms.

Raja Rao who is counted among the most significant Indian novelists writing in English during the middle decades of the 20th century, wrote *Kanthapura* in 1938, which is a great example of mythical adaptation. Rao draws analogies from *Ramayana* by drawing parallels between Indian struggle for independence together with Gandhian revolution and Lord Rama's struggle and his march along with his army to rescue Seeta, his wife from the palace of Ravana. For instance, he writes:

“The Mahatma will go to the Red-man's country and he will get us *Swaraj* and Rama will come back from exile, and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain and Sita be freed, and he will come back with Sita on his right in a chariot of the air, and brother Bharata will go to meet them with the worshipped 'sandals' of the master on his head. And they enter Ayodhya there will be a rain of flowers. Like Bharata we worship the sandals of the Brother.” (183)

R.K. Narayan uses modern familiar settings and characters and juxtaposes them with themes from popular myths. For instance, he employs the myth surrounding *Bhasmasura* very creatively in *The Man Eater of Malgudi*. *Bhasmasura* is perceived commonly as the demon who resorts to self-destruction. The *asur* is a perfect example of the modern man who is adamant upon destroying the creation. In this context, Srinivasa Iyengar observes:

“*The Man-Eater of Malgudi* was itself meant to be a modern version of one of the Deva Asura conflicts of very ancient times. Vasu is the killer of animals, the purveyor of carcasses, the enemy of Kumar, the temple elephant and the tremor he is prince of darkness. of men (the other); he is of blackness all compact, he glows with evil, The evil here is anti-life, anti-nature and anti-faith but where is the power that is going to rid Malgudi of this demon, this cannibal, this Rakshas?” (382)

Girish Karnad, known primarily as an Indian playwright wrote in Kannada and translated most of his work into English by himself. He is counted among the three great writers of the modern Indian drama; the other two are Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar. Like his other two counterparts, Karnad often takes recourse to history and mythology in order to tackle issues that are contemporary in relevance. He is not limited by the details of the original myth; he enjoys often experimenting successfully with ancient myths and legends to reveal the facts related to modern Indian life. This is his way of juxtaposing the past with the present creatively. Myth brings with it an energy and a power with which Karnad experiments to give voice to the variety, complexity and intricacy of modern life. This brings to his works a cosmological and a metaphysical significance. In his experiments with myth, he was influenced to a large extent by *Mahabharata*, a version published in 1951 by C. Rajagopalachari. Moreover, during his childhood, he was exposed extensively to street plays in Karnataka villages which combined with his deep association with Western drama staged in Mumbai. It added to tempt him to retell the myths and legends of India in the backdrop of modern context. Karnad's peculiar use of myth consists of drawing characters that are caught in psychological, existential and philosophical conflicts. Further, through the use of myths, Karnad indirectly but subtly questions the traditional and historical values embedded in the myths and their present day relevance.

At 23, in 1961, Karnad published *Yayati*. It is a retelling of the story of King Yayati who was one of the ancestors of the Pandavas. Incensed at Yayati's infidelity, Shukracharya curses him into premature old age. As a remedy, Yayati seeks sacrifice of their youth from his sons and one of his sons agrees to do the sacrifice. In this play, Karnad ridicules the ironies of life through characters from *Mahabharata*. It enjoyed huge and instant success and was translated and staged in several other Indian languages soon after it was published. The play was also adapted in Hindi for a stage performance by Satyadev Dubey and the Amrish Puri, the legendary actor played the role of the protagonist.

Shashi Tharoor, an eloquent Indian writer and politician, writes with a flawless merging of fiction and myth. In *The Great Indian Novel*, he employs the framework of *Mahabharata* as a fit framework to demonstrate Mahatma Gandhi's return to India in 1915 and Indira Gandhi's second premiership in the early 1980s followed by the state of 'emergency' and its aftermath. He proclaims that, "my fiction seeks to reclaim my country's heritage for itself, to tell, in an Indian voice, a story of India." (25) Employing the mythological format, Tharoor borrows

characters from history and mythological texts and collocates one against the other. For example, he takes characters like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru from history and their corresponding counterparts from the ancient Indian epics. Therefore, the novel operates on two time frames simultaneously; mythical time and historical time. He uses this format to question the Western historiographic tradition in order to problematise historical knowledge. Linda Hutcheon's proposition seems perfectly relevant here:

"There is a deliberate contamination of the historical with didactic and situational discursive elements, thereby challenging the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation." (92)

Devdutt Pattanaik who has a flair for clubbing traditional ideas with the modern world, is another writer who makes a peculiar use of myth in his writings. He draws inspiration for ideas related to business and commerce from many Indian epics. His works include, *Myth=Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology*, *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayan*, *Seven Secrets of Shiva*, *The Book of Ram*, *Seven Secrets of Vishnu*, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharat*, *Shikhandi: and the other Tales they don't Tell You*, *My Gita* etc. For him myth is "essentially a cultural common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together. This understanding may be religious or secular" (*Myth=Mithya* 39).

Amish Tripathi, another modern playwright known for his Shiva Trilogy, which fuses together myth, history, and fiction. It talks about a particular man's journey and how his journey was converted into a legend which in turn made him into a God. The individual parts of the trilogy are: 'The Immortals of Meluha', 'The Secret of the Nagas' and 'The Oath of the Vayuputras.' This trilogy can be visualized as Tripathi's attempt at reconciling religion/myth with science. By proposing that gods were not figments of imagination, he seems to be suggesting that they were men of flesh and blood at a particular time in history. The 'godhood' that is being ascribed to them has been earned by them by their good deeds and *karma*. He goes on to suggest that their names carry weighty meaning and they are not just names; they signify virtues and qualities that are present in the ordinary mortals capable of becoming great leaders and gods. He believes that those who are perceived as gods also suffer existential pangs and strive to make some sense out of the world order. In *The Secret of the Nagas*, Shiva's uncle tells him,

“It is your karma to fight evil. It doesn’t matter if the people that evil is being committed against don’t fight back. It doesn’t matter if the entire world chooses to look the other way. Always remember this. You don’t live with the consequences of other people’s karma. You live with the consequences of your own.” (144)

In this context, Devdutt Pattanaik has something similar to say:

“Both *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are about human society and about rules. In the *Ramayana*, Ram follows the rules but in the *Mahabharata*, Krishna breaks the rules. We are told both are righteous. Both uphold dharma. Both are forms of God. Both fight corruption. How can that be?” (“Rules Do not make Ram”, *Mumbai Mirror*, Aug 18, 2010)

Kavita Kané, an Indian writer writing mythology-fiction focuses on the neglected and altogether forgotten female characters of the Indian epics. She presents myths and their import through a woman’s perspective. Her notable works comprise of *Karna’s Wife: The Outcast Queen*, *Sita’s Sister*, *Menaka’s Choice*, and *Lanka’s Princess*. For instance, *Sita’s Sister* is a novel about Lakshmana’s wife, Urmilla who doesn’t really figure in the mainstream myth. Urmilla is left behind alone when her husband, Lakshmana chooses to accompany his brother Rama and his wife Sita on exile for fourteen years. The novel carries a fresh perspective that was hitherto neglected because it is told exclusively through Urmillas. It narrates her ordeal when she is left to fight her life all alone. In spite of everything, she emerges as a woman of courage, conviction and perseverance. Therefore, Kané makes use of myth to give voice to her feminist commitments. *The Palace of Illusions*, a novel by another female mythological author, Chitra B Divakaruni, also retells the story of *Mahabharata* from the point of view of another marginal character, Draupadi. This novel also combines feminism with myth, history and fiction.

Ashwin Sanghi combines history, theology and mythology for his fictional works. In *Chanakya’s Chant*, as the title itself suggests, he goes back into history affected by mythology and uses the legend of Chanakya. Chanakya carries the connotations of a strategist who plans with intelligence as well as cunning for the sake of the State. In the novel, Chanakya comes to life through his fictional equivalent, Pandit Gangesagar Mishra. For Sanghi, myths are perfect analogies for explaining concepts like *karma* and the equation between cause and effect. Therefore, rather than restricting its import to the myth itself, the myth becomes an

explanation of the human experience and its associated problems of the world that is remote from the myth. "Myth ceases to be merely primitive and becomes universal. It ceases to be false and becomes true. It depicts the human condition." (Segal 48)

In addition to Indian writers writing in English, there are many writers writing in their respective regional languages that focus on myth, folklore and legend to bring to the forefront the modern problems or even at times to delve deeper and critically evaluate the historical process leading to those problems in myth and legends. In other words, such writers go back into history to handle present. For example, *The Untouchable Spring*, a novel by Kalyan Rao, written originally in Telugu is a saga of *Dalits* or low caste Hindus, who find themselves oppressed at the hands of Hindu upper classes. The novel traces the origin of the *Dalits* in the myth of a cow, 'Kamadhenu' wherein a curse from a god reduces a whole class and its successive generations to low caste wretched people. The *devas* and *devatas* join the gods in cursing when they pronounce that the person involved shall live in *kaliyuga*, the age when goddess *kali* will reign supreme, eating the meat of dead cows and sweeping the streets, an apt comment on how *Dalits* live. Rao uses the myth critically for the reader to evaluate the justification behind the continuous oppression and persecution faced by *Dalits*, earlier labeled as untouchables. The novel has been critically acclaimed and also translated into English as well.

Indian society is characterized by and large by tradition and orthodoxy so much so that modern and tradition not only overlap but also clash with one another here and there. In literature also, the collision as well as the dependence is quite explicit. Indian writers are so deeply committed to their past and tradition that their writing draws sustenance from it. Hindu mythology in particular is a subconscious source of symbols and motifs for their works. They weave mythology with the present day, thereby modernizing the past and decontextualizing the present. This juxtaposition has brought forward classic pieces of art and literature. Indian writers have been experimenting with mythology with ever new and creative ways to return to stories associated with them. Lately, the focus has been on an exploration of the minor characters and sub plots. In addition to adding value to the work of art, employment of myths and legends enables a writer to situate the new work in the larger corpus of literature coming from a particular culture or place and also beyond.

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