MYTHOLOGY AND LITERATURE: REVISINTING AND REINTERPRETING THE PAST

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Abstract

The present paper proposes to study the disciplines of Mythology and Literature in context of their mutual relationship. The oldest civilization of India is blessed with divert cultures and religions that have influenced Indian mythology continuously. Many Indian authors look back to Indian mythology to comment upon present social and political scenario. Writers are revisiting this age old treasure of myths and history, to redefine the society by linking past with present. This research paper is an attempt to define Mythology while exploring its two fold relationship with Literature

Keywords: mythology, culture, history, society etc.

Myths and history have reappeared and been reinterpreted from new and different perspectives to provide new insights into both these disciplines as well as literature. The most obvious and significant association between mythology and history is that they have inspired literature and art. As Robert A. Segal rightly comments in his book titled *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, "A standard theme in literature courses has been the tracing of classical figures, events and themes" (84). All great literary men from Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Byron and Keats to T.S. Eliot, Joyce etc. have successfully exploited classical mythology and history in their works to afford new magnitude to literature. Mythology and history can be used in literature directly, with some literary expansion, or in a suggestive way to symbolize something else. The oldest civilization of India is a beautiful amalgam of diverse cultures and religions that have enriched Indian mythology and history endlessly. Writers are revisiting this old treasure to portray the continuation between past and present by transcending the boundaries of time and space. This is the reason that many great Indian writers have used our age old tales in their literary creations. RabindraNath Tagore, ShriAurobindo, T.P. Kailasam, Girish Karnad, DharamveerBharti, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Khushwant Singh, Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh are some writers who have profoundly exploited mythology and history in their literary creations.

The major sources of Indian Mythology are four Vedas-*Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and *Puranas*. The hymns sung during Vedic period (1400BC) were collectively called *Vedas*

among which Rig-Veda is the oldest one. Great Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are the products of classical age. *Puranas* were also composed at that time. These myths are so popular with common people that even children are familiar with major mythical heroes and stories. They are infused with ethics, culture and even religion of people. Being so close to collective consciousness of society, it is quite obvious that literature cannot escape the labyrinths of Indian mythology. Mythology is now interpreted through different perspectives. The unnoticed and mute mythical figures are given voices. These tales are retold in literature from the point of view of ignored characters as Chitra Banerjee in her famous novel *Palace of Illusions* retells the tale of *Mahabharata* from Panchaali's point of view. Her desires, dreams and sufferings are put forward from a feministic perspective. She herself says in the introduction to the novel that women do not have their deserved share in history. The novel becomes the powerful critique of patriarchal constructedness of society which does not give freedom or liberty to a woman to take her own decisions and confines her to the four walls of house. Mahasweta Devi also revisits mythology in her stories "Draupadi" and "Breast-giver" to depict women's powerless position in a patriarchal social set up.

Myth is also used to satirize the present social condition. Shashi Tharoor uses myth to depict the complexity of modern times in his novel *The Great Indian Novel*. The renowned actor, film producer and playwright Girish Karnad, whose plays are truly groomed in mythology, addresses certain existentialist questions and challenges accepted notions with the artistic use of myths in his plays like *Hayavadana, Yayati, Naga-Mandala* and *The Fire and the Rain*. His mythical themes are often identified with the contemporary reality. A very prominent example of use of mythology in Punjabi literature is Guru Gobind Singh's literary masterpiece *Chandi di Vaar*. In this heroic couplet the war between *Devtas* and *Asuras* in which Devi Durga leads Devtas to victory is projected to serve the purpose of awakening the masses. *Chandi di Vaar* had a "magical effect" on psyche of masses to fight against rulers of the time. Shiv kumar Batalvi's *Loona* is based on Kissa Pooran Bhagat , in which poet describes the longings of young Loona, who is married to much elder king Salwan, for genuine love and companion of her own age. Like mythology, history has also reappeared in our literature since ages.

"Myth" is a word derived from Greek word *mythos* which can be defined as utterance. On first place, myth can be defined as a story, a narrative usually concerned with supernatural events, gods and goddesses or even human beings. Mythology can be categorized commonly in three types of tales on the basis of their subject matter: Sagas, legends and folktales. Saga is a tale based upon great historical event. Legend is a tale that is associated with some historical person or a place. Many great historical figures have many legends associated with their lives. Folktale can be defined as simple narrative of adventure, often containing elements of ingenious trickery and of magic, perhaps involving superhuman creatures, e.g. monsters and giants. But to limit mythology only to a story will be to reduce its importance. Mythology is a tale of our remote past; those narratives which are held dear and meant to be

preserved by people are carried forward to next generations in form of mythology. Mythology is not only the index of primitive man's mode of thinking but also reflects the psyche of people. In creation of mythology, unconscious and collective mind operates instead of conscious and individual mind. So myths are the stories formed by a particular cultural group handed over from one generation to another generation. Romila Thapar defines mythology in her essay "Origin Myths and the Early Indian Historical Tradition" following words:

> Events concerning the more remote periods often take the form of a myth. Myth is in a sense a prototype history since it is a selection of ideas composed in narrative form for the purpose of preserving and giving significance to an important aspect of past. Although myths cannot be used as descriptive sources on the past, their analysis can reveal the more emphatic assumptions of a society. Myths record what a people like to think about their past. . . (754)

Myth is of high importance for historians or sociologist because it reflects the cultural, beliefs and values and the way of living of the society from which it emerges. It serves as the index of our past, particularly the past which has no written account as such. Romila Thapar says that mythology is the mean of preserving the information in societies where the oral tradition rather than the use of literature was the means of communication. In this way, myths made our past "intelligible and meaningful" (Thapar 756) Mythology is deeply rooted in social reality of a particular time period is evident from the fact that there is constant modification in mythology with changing social and cultural scenario. This constant modification of mythology establishes a link between past and present. Mythology, in this way records what is permanent and eternal in humanity and establishes continuity between past and present.

Marxist thinker George Thompson in his book *Essence of Humanism* says that "Mythical thinking is the mode of thinking of primitive man"(64). Man is very curious by nature and seeks explanation of every natural phenomenon: how the vegetation grows, how rain falls from the sky, how the seasons change and how the sun rises and sets at fixed time. Narrow sphere of primitive man's knowledge developed some sort of explanation for all bewildering phenomena of nature. His life was full of uncertainties and dangers of natural calamites like earthquakes, floods, wild animals, diseases etc. The beauty and the blessing of nature in the form of waterfalls, flowers and fruits laden trees, cool breeze, fertile soil, filled man with a sense of gratitude. This life of primitive man was perfect to generate the idea of some supernatural power which controls the entire world, the civilization. Out of this grew these stories about Gods and Goddesses, good and bad spirits and passed into mythology. Myths explain very basic questions as how the word came into existence, what is the relation between the divine and the human world. Karen Armstrong proposes four things about myth: Firstly, a myth is nearly always rooted in the experience of death and fear of extinction. Secondly mythology is usually inseparable from ritual. Thirdly, the most powerful myths are

about extremity, they force us to go beyond our experience and finally, all mythology speaks of another plane that exists along side our own world and in some sense support it (04).

Mythology operates "in and through imagination" (65). Thomson calls it a child like act of make believe in which the fantasy is mistaken as reality. The word myth is derived from "*mythos*". In Greek language "mythos" was considered inferior to "logos" which essentially means wisdom. As the name indicates, Myths are considered inferior to scientifically proved knowledge. Even today myths are considered fairy tales created by primitive people to explain the natural phenomena which was otherwise unexplainable due to the lack of science and philosophy. But this imagination is not completely devoid of reality as mythology emerges from the social reality itself. Mythology is very deeply infused with the culture of masses that it becomes the index of their way of living and beliefs.

Myths are told and retold by many generations and being continuously remolded. Although it is not conscious art but it has achieved the status of natural perfection. Like literature mythology is also rooted in imagination. In primitive society myths were credited with the magical power of controlling reality by a mere word or command, illusion, a child like act of "make believe" was there(Thompson 65). Even when myths are refashioned into art the element of illusion is still there, "But now it is objectified, readers are aware of it as illusion" (Thompson 65). Art is the world of conscious makes believe. Mythical thinking gives place on one side to rational and scientific thinking and on the other hand to religion. Thompson writes that Instead of these two developments, there is also a third one - art and literature, in which myth becomes the raw material. The power of human beings to imagine something that is not immediately present produces both literature and mythology.

Segal writes that the relationship between myth and literature is two fold :

- Mythic origin of literature
- Use of myth in literature (79)

The approach of mythic origin of literature was pioneered by Jane Harrison, Gilbert Murray and F.M.Cornford. When ritual and myth are performed for their own sake, they become art. Drama is an obvious example of it. Harrison, Murray and Cornford applied this theory to origin of Greek epic, tragedy and even to Shakespearean drama-

> For literary myth – ritualists, myth become literature when it is severed from ritual. Myth tied to ritual is religious literature; cut of from ritual is secular or plane literature (qtd. in Segal79).

These theories do not reduce literature to myth and vice versa only but offer an explanation of transformation of myth and ritual into literature. The relationship between myth and literature is so close that some critics argue that not only drama but all genres of literature are derived from myths. In his book *The Idea of a Theater,* Francis Fergusson, finds the roots of sufferings of tragic hero in myth of vegetation God in which king is killed and replaced for the prosperity of kingdom (qtd. in Segal 81). There are some universal symbols in different mythologies. These symbols carry the same or very similar meaning for a large potion of

mankind. Symbols like earth mother, sky father, light, blood etc. recur again and again in mythologies of diverse cultures. Perhaps literature also borrowed its imagery and symbolism from mythology. The oldest civilization of India is blessed with divert cultures and religions that have influenced Indian mythology continuously. Many Indian authors look back to Indian mythology to comment upon present social and political scenario. Writers are revisiting this age old treasure of myths and history, to redefine the society by linking past with present.

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