



The Utility of Mythical References in Indian Literature : A Review Based on Indian Fiction

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ABSTRACT

“Myths are the most important part and parcel of Indian Fiction. They include religion, ethics, philosophy, art, literature and all thoughts of emancipation very recently. Furthermore, myths are the stories of prehistoric age which have descended to us by oral tradition. They also include insight of individual or group values in an allegorical way. Simply it is a story in the form of narrative or poetic literature. It is made of cognition, a well system of thought, a way of life, only as art is. That is why most of the writers as traditional values use this trend and write in mythical way. Raja Rao and M.R. Anand are such writers who used the term myth in their writings. It has its own central forming power. Anyhow, myth is the mother of any philosophical mind. Therefore, most of the Indian writers have been inspired by myths in Indian philosophy in the 20th century. Thus the present paper highlights the term ‘Myth and its utility’ in literature in the Indian context.”

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INTRODUCTION :

Myth is the very foremost basis of religion, philosophy, art and literature and all thoughts of fruition and emancipation. Myth is and has always been an integral element of literature. Most of the literary critics have always been interested in the contents of myth in itself, as against anthropologists and historians who study it in the context of individual and society. Myth also figures in many contemporary disciplines, other than literature e.g., anthropology, psychology, comparative religion and sociology. That is why myths are an integral part of Indian Fiction.

‘The Living Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary’ defines myth as:

“ A fable or legend embodying the convictions of a people as to their gods or other divine personages, their own origin and early history and the heroes connected with it; or the origin of the world, in a looser sense any invented story; something or someone having no existence in fact”¹

Therefore, myths are the stories of prehistoric age which have descended to us by oral tradition. Myth contains the ‘inexpressible insight’ of individual or group values in an allegorical way. It is a form of verbal art dealing with the life stories of super human beings or gods or some other forms of creatures more powerful than the worldly creatures. Myth enables us to know the origin of the things and also enables to manipulate the tales of ancient lore according to his own will. All the cosmological speculations, religious beliefs and complex narrative symbols of ancient’s culture of a society are visualized in the term myth. Richard Chase writes:

“The fact is that the simplest meaning of the Greek word ‘Myth’ is the right one; a myth is a story, myth is narrative or poetic literature. Myth is therefore art and must be studied as such. It is a mode



of cognition, a system of thoughts, a way of life, only as art is. It can be opposed to science only as art is opposed to science. There is no question of one defeating the other. They are complimentary and fulfill different needs”²

However, generally, human fears gave rise to the myths of gods, demons, titans, and dragons etc. Epidemics and unnatural death also became a cause of myth making. Particularly whenever a man could not answer any riddle of natural phenomenon, he resorted to myth making. According to *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*; “It seems to be almost universal tendency for primitive man to impute a personal existence to natural objects, especially conspicuous objects. In its most primitive form; the ferish or animistic stage, this may not lead to the production of myth; but the polydaemonic and polytheistic stages that follow lend themselves to extensive mythological development.”³

Further, in Frye’s opinion, the mythical golden age becomes the pastoral convention; the mythical account of man’s fallen state becomes the conventions of irony, the mythical sense of the separation between the power of the gods and the pride of man provides the convention of tragedy and the myths of heroic adventures become conventions of romance. Myth is, thus, an informing structural principle of literature. In modern time, myth is transmitted to us mainly through the medium of literature. Furthermore, Frye says : “We must know that myth is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to any ritual and archetypal narrative to the oracle.

Myth is the archetype, though it might be convenient to say myth only when referring to narrative and archetype when speaking of significance”.⁴ That is why, Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, talks of three organizations of myths and archetypal symbols in literature. Myth is the mother of all philosophies and all the literature of different languages but at the same time it is the child of literature. Since the literature of all languages emerges from the myth, so myth is the mother of literature. But as literature grows, many new myths are created and many different interpretations are given to ancient stories, so myth may also be called child of literature. Furthermore, Reflecting on the utility of the use of mythical references in Indo-Anglian fiction, *S.C. Sanyal quotes according to the Meenakshi Mukherjee’s observation as :*

“Since most of these myths are part of the heritage of all Indians regardless of their language, using myth as symbol of the Indo-Anglian fiction is an excellent artistic solution of the problems arising out of the heterogeneity of his audience. The contemporary novelist is pre-occupied with the idea of expressing the whole of modern life. For Indian writers, a preoccupation with the Radha-Krishan legend or an allegory based on Draupadi’s choice of husbands would provide a similar vital connection. The violence before or after the partition becomes a re-enacting of the Kurukshetra fratricide”.⁵

Richard Chase also discusses some functions of myths. According to him myths are told in order to preserve the meaningfulness and purposefulness of social customs and institutions. He says that literature becomes mythical by suffusing the natural with preternatural force toward certain ends, by capturing the impersonal forces of the world, and directing them toward the fulfillment of certain emotional needs”.⁶ Nevertheless, we miss the complete view of man if we ignore the meaning and function of myths in society. According to P. Lal, “Without an absorption in the myths of the land of one’s forefathers, it is not even possible to live a meaningful life”.⁷

Thus, in Indo-Anglian literature, India’s culture is counted rich amongst the world civilization. It is permeated with a varied and profound mythology. So most of the Indian writers in English in 20th Century like *Sudhin Ghose, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao* have been inspired by Indian mythology and have made extensive use of it in their fiction.



In this sequence, Raja Rao is acknowledged as one of the great writers of Indian fiction. He was born in a very ancient sound Indian Brahmin family of Mysore. He studied at Hyderabad and the University of Aligarh. At the age of 20, he went to France for research work in literature. Although he came to India a number of times, he has become an émigré living mostly in France and the USA. His literary genius was shaped by many influences, the most important being that of his grand-father, Ramakrishna, who was a *Vedantin* and who taught him the Upanishads at the age of five. His higher studies importantly shaped his creative mind. Gandhi's impact on his philosophy also conditioned his creative mind and this impact has been shown in his novel '*Kanthapura*' written in Indian context.

The most tremendous influence, however, was that of his Guru, ShriAtmananada, Raja Rao admitted this influence in these words: "A South-Indian Brahman, nineteen spoon-fed on English with just enough Sanskrit to know, I knew so little, with an indiscrete education in Kannada, my mother tongue."⁸

The first novel *Kanthapura* written by Raja Rao was published in 1938. Then, after a gap of twenty two years appeared *The Serpent and The Rope* in 1960. The reason for this long silence was that he was in turmoil whether to write or not. But the great novel took shape under the grace of his Guru. His other novel, written almost at the same time but published later, *The Cat and Shakespeare* came out in 1965, and *Comrade Kirillov* was published in 1976.

However, a collection of short stories under the title *The Cow of the Barricades* were published in 1947. Another anthology of short stories, *The Policeman and the Rose* appeared in 1978. He won the SahityaAkademi Award in 1966 and Padma Bhushan in 1969. That is why, writers like *Mulk Raj Anand, Sudhin Ghose, R.K. Narayan* and others in the 20th Century have not only used literature myths such as stories from *The Ramayana, The Mahabharata* and *The Puranas* but also stories from the local legends, folklore as well as primitive rituals like the ritual for rain, for harvest of fertility and other sources in order to add a mythical colouring to their works because this is a part of our cultural pattern.

Here it is also noteworthy that the repertory of myths may be the same for almost all the writers but each one of them has handled it differently. For example – *Raja Rao* has used myth as part of digressional technique. The method of *Sudhin Ghose* is also mostly digressional. In general *Sudhin Ghose* weaves variety of legends and myths and folk tales into the fabric of his novel to attain some desired effects whereas *R.K. Narayan, M.R. Anand* and others have used myths as structural parallels, where a mythical situation underlines the whole as part of a novel.

Further, in this respect, Anand's novel *The Old Women and The Cow* attempts to purify human conduct through a conscious return to the primitive and mythical aspect of human experience. This work explores all dimensions and the impact of which can be grasped only in the light of the modern experience as a whole using the mythic parallel to renew the recurrent aspects of life and to show the basic similarity inherent in them. Thus, Anand aims at to highlight the communication of the most intense vision of life through the re-interpretation of the ancient classical myths through his writing work or fiction.

Conclusion : Now it can be traced out that almost all the Indian writers have used the term 'Myth' in different ways. Raja Rao has used it as a part of digressional technique. R.K. Narayan and M.R. Anand have used it as structural parallels where a mythical situation underlines the whole part of a novel. M.R. Anand, aims at to highlight the most intense vision of life through the re-interpretation of the ancient classical myths used at different places in his works. Raja Rao also has been acknowledged as



one of the great writer in the fiction world who used this term at the relevant places in his literature. Therefore, myths have their own importance in literature since a long time. We can't ignore them as a part of fiction in Indian writing.

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