



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.3., 2017 (July-Sept.)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

INDIAN ENGLISH FICTIONS: MYTHS INTERSPERSED

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ABSTRACT

Man always goes back to the past in search for answers. History, Philosophy, Myth proves to be great sources of all answers. To find the real truth man takes up a journey to the path which he left behind years ago. Writers often possess a strange link between their works and the myths and folklores of their culture. The influence of Greek and Roman myth is huge in English literature. In Indian English literature, the use of Hindu mythology is like literary tradition. Indian myths have an extended history resolving all kind of social, political, spiritual apprehensions. These majestic tales give a certain freedom to the writers to put his thoughts in a grand fashion. We can find a collaboration of higher truth, fiction and reality all together in Indian novels. Indian myths help in deeper understanding of mankind as well as instruct and preach about the perfect way of human life. Indian novelists make the fullest use of myth symbolically and metaphorically. The present study explores the mythical world in Indian fictions.

Keywords- Myth, Fiction, Revisionist writings.

Myths are the stories which are narrated in an imaginative and symbolic manner, emphasizing on the truth of the cosmos. These complex sagas cannot be explained in terms of ordinary connotation. Because myth holds history, customs, ancient faiths and traditions. Indian mythology is certainly a significant part of Indian culture. Myth often fused with legends chronicles and folklores in order to shape believe of the common people. The West maintained the rich tradition of using myth and folklores in literary works. Greek myth and biblical stories are present in every genre of English literature to add profoundness to the meaning of illustrated works. This tradition continued till this modern age. The modern artists, poets and novelists such as T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce and William Golding etc. used legends and myths extensively in their works.

Particularly in India, we find myths and folklores have its own heritage. Indian writers inherited myth and cultivated it in every form of literature as Indian myth proved to be a generous background. Indian English literature is enriched with stories and themes drawn from *Vedas*, *Upanishad*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and various Buddhists scriptures. The truths of Hindu culture are founded by a large number of myths such as Vedic texts, Epics and Puranas. Indian Mythology enriches Indian culture and makes it a unique one in the world. From generation to generation, Indian mythology has been passed by the word of mouth as in the form of stories. The presence of myth is clearly evident in every Indian regional literature. Explaining the importance of myth Elina Helander-Renvall says-

“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.”

M. H. Abrahams defined myth as- “If the protagonist is a man rather than a supernatural being, the story is usually not called myth but legend. If the story concerns supernatural beings but is not a part of a systematic mythology, it is usually classified as a folktale”. Famous psychoanalytic Freud acclaimed myth “to be the great primordial truth, the precipitate of the unconscious”. Therefore myth in literature is consciously used by writer and the writer’s mind is unconsciously influenced by ancient tales. Myth is a fantasy which creates a magical world of wonders providing universal fables. Adaptation of myth as a literary device is a very primitive tradition. Classics like Homer, Virgil, Ovid and Dante greatly inspired by ancient Greek and Roman myths. Mythical allusions and metaphorical representation of myth in present literature helps to connect with the roots as well as preservation of ancient culture. The complex concepts of myth have always fascinated and invite attention from different disciplines such as, anthropology, linguistics, history and archaeology. Today in literature, the mythical character’s life and conditions are compared to modern life situations and retold in a complete different way. Myth shapes the meaning of a literary work with all depth and breadth of its accumulated meaning. Myth and legends provides a wide range of scope for inspiration. The faith on the myth enables a writer to choose elements from it and use it for the purpose. The retelling of myth in different works also helps in continuing the rich tradition. Myth helps the writers to project personal, social and political issue in a mythical disguise. Mythical elements, legends and backdrop of events serve as a huge canvas to portray and project issues of contemporary society like racism, discrimination, injustice etc. Myth serves literature both as a metaphor and allegory.

By the time we come to this century, we have a rich storage of myths and folklores. In spite of the difference of race, country culture and religious belief, some folklore has been some kind affinity that reminds us of their common link with the people and culture. Devadutt Pattnaik puts myth in his *Myth=Mithya:A handbook of Hindu Mythology*(2006) as-

“Myth is essentially a cultural common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together. This understanding may be religious or secular”.

In every genre of literature we find extensive use of Indian myth. Indian mythology served as a muse to writers. Writers like A.K. Ramanujan, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and modern writers like ShashiTharoor, Amish Tripathy, Devadutt Pattnaik, Kavita Kane, Chitra Benerjee Devakaruni, etc used Indian myth in different contexts in their fictional works. These writers retold the stories and revised them for literary purposes. Indian myth proved to be open texts and a subject for multiple interpretations. Sometimes myth used to evoke nationalism and sometimes it is used as satire against social norms. Ancient manuscript Bhagavad Gita used for nationalistic purposes by Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Gandhiji during Indian freedom movement. Allegorical representation of mythical legends and tales are very common in their works.

Raja Rao’s ‘Kanthapura’ is a great example of mythical adaptation. In this rustic novel, Rao frames the Gandhian revolution in terms of Ram leading his army to rescue Seeta. The British are symbolized as the evil spirited villain Ravana. Kanthapura signified as Ayodhya, Gandhi as an epitome of divine Ram. The mythical story of Ram’s victory over Raavan symbolically presented as the victory of Indians over Britishers. In that context people of Kanthapura says in this context-

“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 (p-183).”

Raja Rao skilfully blended mythical figures in his writings to convey patriotic messages. Besides mythical setting, the novel also projects various socio economic division, blind believes, superstitions and caste system prevailed at that time.

Another acclaimed writer R.K. Narayan wrote various versions of Ramayan and Mahabharata. His works are full of mythical themes. Narayan implicated the ideology of Dharma of Hindu religion in mythopoeia terms. R.K. Narayan's fictional world Malgudi presents rustic and realistic life but the characters and situations have impressions of Indian mythology. The backdrop of Malgudi have Sarayu river, Banyan tree, the Nallappa grove etc. all lead to a mythical atmosphere. The myth of 'Bhasmasura', the self-destroying demon used very creatively in "Man eater of Malgudi". Srinivasalyengar observes:

"The Man-Eater of Malgudi was itself meant to 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?" (Iyengar, 382)

R.K. Narayan's fictions echoes his believe on the principles of Hindu philosophy. In The Bachelor of Arts, the description of the four stages in Chandran's life can be compared with ancient Hindu tradition of four Ashrama's – Sisya, Grahastha, Vanaprastha and Bhikshu. In The Guide, it is believed that the river of Malgudi was created as Parvati –wife Lord Shiva jumped into fire. R.K. Narayan was a great story teller. Most of his works have mythical breath blended with reality.

Shashi Tharoor's 'The Great Indian Novel' is a perfect blend of fiction and myth. Tharoor used the Mahabharata as a fit framework to demonstrate the Emergency Situation 1975-77. He uses fictional characters on the basis of mythical characters. Ganga Datta becomes Bhishma, blind Dhritarashtra stands for Nehru, Yudhishtira becomes Morarji Desai and the antagonist Shakuni and Duryodhana become Shakuni Shankar Dey and Priya Duryodhani. The message, Tharoor tries to send out that democracy can only survive when there is an exchange of opinion. Tharoor states 'Many of the characters, incidents and issues in the novel based on people and events described in the great epic the Mahabharata, a work remains a perennial source of delight and inspiration to millions in India(419)' Tharoor wrote this novel to give an idea of secular and democratic India after the intolerant political situations.

Contemporary Indian writer, Amish Tripathy wrote Rama Chandra series titled Scion of Ikshvaku and Shiva trilogy rests on the ideals of Ram Rajya. In Shiva's trilogy, we see the myth, history, and fiction fused together. The trilogy comprises 'The Immortals of Meluha', 'The Secret of the Nagas' and 'The Oath of the Vayuputras'. The story revolves around the hero Shiva who is charged with uniting India and creating a unified polity. Mythologist, Devdutt Pattanaik is the name of worth mentioning. He has written over thirty books on Indian myths. His works include 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. All his literary works are based on Indian myths. For these writers myth served as extended metaphor in terms of presenting modern life stories.

Indian female writers displayed their reflective interest in employing mythical elements in their works. An interesting use myth can be seen in Kamala Markandeya's novel 'Nectar in a Sieve' in which a snake is found present everywhere. On a mythological level, it could be associated with the snake in the garden of Eden to tempt Rukmani to unhappiness but Nathan timely cuts it into pieces, but the action evokes yet another mythological connection. The story symbolizes the victory of good over evil.

Kavita Kane's feministic novel Sita's sister, a novel about Urmilla, Lakshmana's wife, who left behind when her husband chooses exile along with Rama and Sita. The entire novel is written from the view of Urmilla on the absence of her husband, She fights with all kind of adverse situations and proves herself as a strong woman. In the novel, Urmila is represented as a woman with different magnitudes. She re-creates Urmila and embodies her as a woman with immense courage and conviction, a distinct individual with an intelligent mind. Kane presented the neglected characters of the myth with a feministic perspective.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's famous novel 'The Palace of Illusions' (2008) retells the Mahabharata through the eye of Panchaali. Through The Palace of Illusions Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has offered homage to the Indian Ethnic Background by adopting the mythology in her novels. A timeless myth of Indian society has been presented exquisitely and creatively by Divakaruni. The Mahabharata remains a complicated myth, but Divakaruni has presented it in the first person narrative through the words of Draupadi by making it more comprehensible. The novel is written in first person giving Panchaali's impressions and thoughts vividly. Divakaruni represents Panchaali as a powerful, strong and independent woman, having a feministic approach. The novel begins with the birth of Panchaali. She was not invited by the royal family as she was a girl child and King Dhrupad wanted a son who can continue the legacy. Panchaali was raised in isolation while her brother Prince Dhri learned to be a great warrior. Panchaali has no freedom to learn or to ask questions. Only Krishna, Dhri and Dhai Ma were her companion. Besides being so indifferently treated Panchaali comes out as a courageous and stubborn women. The novel covers whole life of Panchaali including her childhood, marriage, motherhood and death. Besides The Palace of Illusions she has written novels like The Mistress of Spices (1997), Sister of My Heart(1999),The Vine of Desire(2002),Queen of Dreams(2008), One Amazing Thing(2010)and Oleander Girl(2013).Her works are collaboration between myth and real world. Not only, she has recreated mythical characters in modern world with feministic approach but also projects women's psych in male dominated society.

To conclude, folklore and myths have a very long and ancient relationship with literature and in the case of Indian literature, they are present directly or indirectly in Indian novels, poetry and nonfiction work. A majority number Indian English fictions and plays are based on myth. As if, myth is the answer of every question for the writers. When they wanted to convey a message or to express deep philosophy of life, they choose myth as their inspiration. Myths and legends in these works of Indian writers appear to add a new kind of interest and connect them to the age of old rites, customs and beliefs of Indian people.

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