

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 8. Issue.1. 2021 (Jan-Mar.)

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

MYTHS AND MYTHOLOGY: MOVING BEYOND THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

AYUSHREE GUPTA

Email: gupta.ayushree@gmail.com



AYUSHREE GUPTA

Article information

Received:19/2/2021

Accepted: 24/3/2021

Published online:31/3/2021

doi: [10.33329/ijelr.8.1.189](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.8.1.189)

ABSTRACT

Mythology dates back to the earliest times of human history, they are the most ancient stories mankind have and its major objective other than to answer the questions about the origin, is to inform society how to live during that time; particularly in the sense of survival. While traces of myths from an ancient era or a society of the past can be seen without any doubt; whereas, outlining myths that are prevalent in contemporary society is complex. In ancient myths there are myths about fire, hunter myths about how to gather food and keep the tribe alive, agricultural myths, illustrative myths for children, myths on parenting, and more; studying such myths presents an archetype for human behavior, the world of myth equip mankind with guidance to face critical matters in human existence-- war and peace, light and darkness, life and death, good and evil. As time progresses, myths evolve. Over the years, Mythology has been argued about and theorized in several ways. It touches the surface of not only Literature but Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, Religion, and also Science. Even in Modern times, while analyzing individual consciousness, institutions, or society as a whole, one can trace the elements of mythology and myths in the consciousness of an individual or society as a whole.

This paper will examine the archaic and contemporary status, influence, and relevance of myths in modern life and culture.

Keywords: Mythology, Myth, Culture, Archetypal, Psyche, Consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

In modern times, scientific advancements have been able to answer questions that for centuries seemed unanswerable, from subjects such as biology and meteorology to psychology and sociology; it seems that with each passing year there is more knowledge discovered. In ancient times such science was limited yet the yearning for knowledge and enlightenment was as powerful as it is today. Mankind offered its solutions for at least relatively primitive answers from which spring forth stories passed down from generation to generation, these stories are collectively referred to as mythology. Every culture across the world, from Greeks and Romans to Asian, native Americans, Australian aboriginals has its collection of myths. Many of these myths focus on similar themes and subject matters, many attempt to make sense of unexplained phenomena such as: creation myths; supernatural forces controlling the world; powers of love, war, greed and courage; terrible monsters, and the heroes that battle them. There are also tales of innocence, of corruption, and of what happens after

death. People of the ancient period considered these phenomena as truths. These stories helped to shape the very life of these cultures by gradually forming belief systems that rooted themselves into every aspect of daily life from the hunter-gatherer tribes to the Polynesian islands to the upper and lower kingdom of Egypt. Traditions and customs were followed to the letter out of fear of angering gods and spirits. In Mesopotamia, Hammurabi's code of law emphasized the eye for an eye principle since he believed the god of Shamash, Anu, and Bell governed the world. In ancient Greece, stories of Kharan the greedy fairy men of the river Styx led to the tradition of the dead being cremated or buried with coins, without which the deceased souls would never be allowed to enter the gates of Hades. Various Native American tribes would create a spirit to aid in their hunts or their harvests. The book of Exodus tells of Moses relaying the ten commandments on the slopes of Mount Sinai that became the cornerstone of all Abrahamic faiths. The Mayan, Aztec, and Incan cultures practiced human sacrifice as stories circulated about other gods demanding human flesh and blood for these civilizations to survive. The examples are nigh endless and these are but a few as time would go on and humanity would learn new truths about the world and themselves. These early stories were regarded simply as myth: old stories, nothing more; but with enlightenment also comes new questions and new hypotheses in an attempt to answer them. Perhaps not on the scale of how the world came to be or how the weather changes but stories closer to home would evolve. In 1800, a scientific and industrial renaissance took place with steam, gas, and electricity beginning to power the world, and people began to wonder if there was anything humanity cannot do.

In 1819, Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, a story about an ambitious yet morally ambiguous scientist who animated a being composed of pieces out of different corpses. His creation turned out to be hideous and monstrous. As a result, he abandoned the creature, leaving it alone to be subjected to the world's cruelty which ends up transforming it into a being of wrath. Mary Shelley's story of *Frankenstein* and his monster asks the question of whether not it is possible or even right to bring a person back to life after death. It then proceeds to answer the question in the form of a narrative, this makes it not too different from the myths and legends of the ancient world which likewise address a question in the form of a story. While stories of the past can be debunked as mere fantasy with scientific achievements and social breakthroughs, new questions in response to this enlightenment will emerge. These questions if they cannot yet be answered scientifically, can and will be answered in the form of fictional narratives, and should these narratives have an impact on human society, whether great or minor, they too become modern myths.

MYTHOLOGY AND THE PSYCHE

When the word myth is used today in common vernacular, it has come to mean lies and falsehood, but this paper shares the transformative aspects of classical and ancient mythology and why these stories are more relevant in the modern world than ever. At present, people are often obsessed with the science of the physical brain, but its logical, linear and rational aspects have a very necessary role and can't easily enter this mythic archetypal dimension. As the poet, W.H. Auden wrote "we are lived by powers we pretend to understand". Amongst other things, myths are descriptive of personal and societal unconscious processes. They link inner and outer worlds via personification, moving from the conceptual to the experiential and metaphorically meaningful, like in the stories of Eros and Psyche, Prometheus, Pandora, Gilgamesh, Anana, Thor, to name just a few.

Myths indwell the Psyche, the Greek term for Soul; and Psyche mediates human's perception of the world. Myths are not soundbites and they are not life hacks, they are inner chronicles of who humans are and so they require a true being with them, being with their beauty, the grace, the nobility, the majesty, the mystery of them. Eternal truths are best understood when incarnated in stories, as the writer Goethe said, "he who cannot draw on 3000 years is living from hand to mouth." The classical world used myths to make sense of their lives and the world around them but what about mankind today? Say a person is ill he has to go see a new doctor and fill out a new patient form. Is there ever a question there that asks what myths are currently living in him? Is it Cinderella waiting to be rescued? Odysseus on a long arduous journey? Icarus flying too close to the sun? Myths are one of the unseen influences that shape human experience, and when mankind fails to perceive the mythic in every day of their lives, humans forget that their myths can either enslave or liberate them. Life experience has taught man to truly know thyself, one should know their gods and goddess and archetypal figures

in myths, legends, and folktales, for each of the structures a style of consciousness and is a metaphor for human actions.

Myths in their ancient impersonal and universal nature help mankind to make sense and find the meaning of lives because they provide a roadmap to the human psyche. One recognizes the plot, knows the storyline and the characters, and can perceive the similar movement within one's psyche and the actions or non-actions to take. There is something in man that instinctively responds to the imagery in myths and the need to connect to these deeper and archetypal patterns. When one turns one's gaze to the myths, one begins to connect to something much larger than one's everyday selves. When humans can perceive the underlying myths to their challenges, they provide a cradle to view life as a divine drama, and that their lives are lived on the back of a bigger story when the personal meets the mythical. One's own internal inherent contradictions need not tear one apart. One doesn't go to the myths for an answer singular but for wisdom and deeper Universal insight which one cannot access when trapped in one's narrative.

Let us talk about a Greek myth involving Persephone and Hades and why it is relevant today? Because it illuminates the human condition in a way that modern life simply can't and it primes mankind to appreciate the cyclical and transitory nature of life. One day the spring maiden Persephone daughter of Zeus, king of all gods, and Demeter the goddess of the harvest was out picking flowers in the field when suddenly Hades, the god of the underworld and the brother of Zeus, bursts out of the ground driving his chariot of black horses and abducts and takes her to the underworld. Persephone screams for help, but only Hecate, the goddess of magic, and Helios, the sun god hear her cries, as does her mother, but she is too far away to do anything. Demeter is frantic and starts searching the earth for nine days and nights for her daughter. Demeter is also associated with the Eleusinian mysteries at this stage. Eventually, Helios tells Demeter that Zeus gave Persephone to Hades to be his bride in the Underworld. Demeter is livid and she vows that nothing on earth will grow again until she sets her eyes on her beloved daughter. So, a terrible famine assaults the earth and people everywhere are starving; Zeus, alarmed by the famine, sends Hermes the messenger god down to the underworld to order Hades to let Persephone go. Hades agrees but before he lets Persephone go, he persuades her to eat some pomegranate seeds. Hermes and Persephone then fly out of the land of the dead and they are greeted by an overjoyed and open-armed Demeter in the upper world, but then she anxiously asks her daughter if she ate anything when she was in the underworld, for if anybody eats the food of Hades, they are bound to remain there. It was agreed that she only ate a handful of seeds Persephone would only have to spend part of the year in the underworld with Hades as his queen. Demeter reluctantly agrees but she says when her daughter is in the underworld as death's bride, that nothing on earth will grow and so this is what mankind knows is winter and when Persephone returns to the upper world, it is springtime and so this myth is used to explain the origin of the seasons. The Homeric hymn to Demeter is one of the oldest Homeric hymns, it dates back to approximately the 7th Century BC. While this myth is western, death and rebirth myths exist in all cultures in various forms for descent, and descent is a continuous and universal theme. This myth is an allegory of the seasons, but it is also a metaphor for the descent to the unconscious, to the psyche, and all her depths. Hades as both a figure and a terrain is felt as those dark times in people's lives, the abyss of void emotional hell. Most humans do not voluntarily enter the underworld, people resist as hard as they can, for the fee for entering is tremendous; being ripped from the familiar known world, confronting death, shattered expectations, identity disintegration, despair, disillusionment, depression, loss, and never-ending endings. Hades though is both the bringer of transformation and crucible of one's becoming. One has taken down to Hades to have a conversation of one's power, one's hubris, misguided illusions of control for when something is requiring maturing within oneself and to transform one's relationship to humiliation and its capacity to control oneself. People are also there to be with sadness, to be with loss, to feel it, to become present to it. To accommodate this part of the experience, it is not about trying to get rid of the uncomfortable feelings and fix the symptoms, it is not about rationalizing one's way out of Hades, but learning to dwell in the mysteries of the underworld. Of course, everybody wants to stay in the upper world, avoid the shame and shadows that lie in the underworld, and confront what is unseen and unknown. Descent to Hades often requires the chaos of life to unfold, often over prioritizing the material, literal and scientific over the abstract, poetic, and spiritual. Everyone is living so fast that their emotions barely have a

chance to catch up with them. People are so mentally and physically busy, they don't digest and assimilate their experiences before jumping on the next thing. Finally, in Hades, everything catches up to them, there is space for expression. People can listen to their hearts and hear their souls. Mankind thinks there is something wrong if a man is in the underworld, but there is no personal growth that doesn't demand a sacrifice, and it's all too often sacrificing those parts of one's identity with which one is most closely associated with. For Persephone, it was her naivety and only knowing one-dimensional surface living, like her one must sacrifice one's linear consciousness for one that is both spherical and holographic. The underworld also asks to release what the western culture places value on, namely things like status, certainty, and productivity. It can't always be springtime, one cannot always be in the spring of one's lives, but one doesn't know how to consciously make space for the destroyer archetype, oneself, as well as the planet's resources, cannot exist in constant creation, in constant spring. People must come to know that underworld, death, winter, what is barren as the equal partner to the upper world creation and respect the cyclical nature of life. Mankind often experiences the severity of the underworld due to the imbalance in their willingness to give the dark half of the cycle decay, decomposition, stagnation, emptiness, nothingness, helplessness, hopelessness, loneliness, it's due and rightful place. Today people are obsessed with the shiny and glamorous world of social media or the pursuit of the light has all costs to the total exclusion of darkness, but that is not how life is and the pressure to 'live our best life' only increases anxiety. As mentioned earlier, one does not turn to myths as an antidote to suffering. When one experiences the absence of light for an extended period, as Persephone did, it gives them the confidence to move from known to the unknown, certainty to uncertainty, from what is visible to trusting the invisible, from what is fallow to be able to sense emergent life and to move from either/or thinking to embrace both. One can be both a child of the upper world and a companion of the underworld. One can exist in both worlds.

Myths help mankind better understand their shared humanity but also honor the diverse ways and honor the way people live and make meaning. Myths bestow on mankind a map of their psyche which enables humans to navigate themselves and the world around them. So, can mankind cultivate a consciousness that perceives life in mythic terms, can one sense when an archetypal figure as a pattern of behavior is attempting to make itself known? Can when a person is in the underworld Persephone's journey give hope that spring always follows winter?

Mankind's challenges and graces have the gods and goddesses and the myths alive in them, so how will this now shift the power a person brings to one's thinking, feeling, choices and actions.

EXISTENCE, FEATURES AND FUNCTION OF MYTHOLOGY IN THE MODERN WORLD

The world is constantly developing and changing, so do the humans who inhabit it. This advancement led to the social and spiritual transformation of society, resulting in a general shift in awareness and understanding of myth and mythology. It is essential to infer that now is the age of reason, where views of mankind are different from those of the past. As in ancient times, mythology and mythological thinking was an outcome of curious minds that were inclined more towards mystic than rational. Nowadays, people live in a global world, where the internet allows easy and rapid access to information from all around the world, which has given mythology a diverse and wider outlook.

The stretch of myths in modern culture, when examined closely, is deep-rooted, though modified, and can be allocated in three categories: ancient, new, and updated. The myths of antiquity and modernity have differences in terms of stability, structure, and image.

Ancient myths include myths that exist unaltered in modern times. They can be referred to as "pre-scientific", as these have been passed down as serious practices which go unquestioned by many even today. For example, evil eye, broken mirror, ancestral spirits, witchcraft, black magic, and many more, which are performed with the suspension of disbelief. This can also include mythologies, which are themes or rituals or sets of beliefs, shared by cultures throughout the world; such as the concept of mother earth, holy water, the association of color white with purity, high forehead with knowledge and greatness. Whereas new myths can be referred to as the ones which are developed and conceived amid scientific discoveries, these phenomena do not have any scientific justification, yet are perceived by many as truths, and enter the everyday life and

consciousness of people. For example, people believing in aliens, time travel, UFOs, the world underwater, superhumans, to mention some. The updated myths are the reappropriated myths, which are retold or adapted to the new time. These can include astrology, psychic phenomena, precognitions, and paranormal claims.

What these three types have in common among other things are Ideological myths. An ideological myth serves to express and uphold conflict between organized groups and as well as within the individual. As members of social movements, ideological groups, political parties, an individual inclines towards one mythic pattern or the other. This allows the existence of different mythic patterns in the culture, permitting an individual to reconcile conflicts and live with his ambivalence. This set of mythology in the modern world is out-pouring and often comes to naught as quickly it's forged, due to the vulnerable applicability of a particular myth and the time of its existence.

From the observations presented above, it can be established that there is a stability and permanence in the existence of myths at all times. Myths perform a specific and special function that varies in different cultures and societies and can be seen as a symbol of people's beliefs in them.

One of the function myths have come to play in the modern world is stereotyping. A stereotype is a misguided idea or a notion that people formulate concerning a thing, person, or group, which often are untrue, overgeneralized, inaccurate, and resistant to new information. As mythological images are often intrinsically saturated, they are effortlessly imprinted in the mind and society, which recurrently gives rise to stereotypes. As a result, it allows myths to oppress the consciousness of concerned individual groups, hence, bring about a mob culture, where free people, either willingly or forcibly cease to think, for example, racial profiling, gender profiling, etc.

Another function myths play in the modern world is symbolism. A symbol represents something by association, expression, resemblance, or convention. It is an art or practice which helps expressing something intangible or invisible with the help of visible or sensuous representation, like signs, gestures, drawings, rituals, etc. The symbolic function of myth allows the myth to serve as a "code". It can be argued that symbolic forms have helped mankind to transform into a social and cultural being. Culture is a symbolic universe comprising meaningful myths. As German Scientist Ernst Cassirer puts it "man is not a thinking animal but a symbolic animal", the understanding of the myths comes through deciphering and interpreting its symbolism.

Undoubtedly, Mythology is present in every culture, and there are people in each culture who believe in myths, but what if, for a person from ancient times myths were a representation of preeminent reality, then with passing time, its influence on human life and conscience intensifies.

Today, the human world is brimming with myths which play a significant task in the working of society. Mythology is the bridge for people's ideas and understanding of the past, present, and future. It is a tool to realize, and perceive the world, attain values, knowledge, art which are interlaced in the encoded stories passed down by older generations to connect spiritually with the world. As Ernest Cassirer annotates "there is not a single natural phenomena or event in human life that cannot be interpreted as myth".

To mention the most common sector in modern times where myths exist is politics. It may appear that in the political sector, the term myth seems alien or improper; but when examined thoroughly one can conclude that myth has been an integral part of politics regardless of time, space or body. Like any other myth, political myths were engineered and distributed by man to influence the perception of the mass. Political myths created in terms of ideologues, in a long run, mold into stereotypes, altering the way of thinking and eliminating the possibility of a different reality; gaining the status of ultimate truth in mass consciousness. Considering the vastness of politics, political myth-making is prone to modifications and alterations in the initial and existent codes and principles.

In modern times, political myths not only exist but are widespread nationally and globally with the help of media and communication. There are ample themes depending on the point of view of the individual and his audience, such as heroic past, unity, golden age, conspiracy, religion, caste, class, damsel and Savior, and more.

Science is one of the other areas to have mythical components and can prove the existence of myth in the modern world. For a long time, it was assumed that mythology and science are two distinctive fields, and science's construct is to discredit or disapprove myths on the scale of facts and proof. Yet, after a thorough search and analysis, one can find the trace and trails of various myths and science's intimate association to myth-making.

The emergence of myth in the premises of science as a whole prevails in the fundamental concept of unification and collaboration of all the surrounding phenomena, also the crude idea of an accord between science and mysticism, substituted from old times. Per se, scientific myths can be described as mythical knowledge which is established upon direct or indirect contact with scientific information and comprise of reasonable form, in the essence of scientific knowledge.

Scientific myths come into existence due to inaccurate deducement or acknowledgment of a sole event as an archetype of an entire system or a class of events. The moment myth steps out of the bounds of scientific society and enters the threshold of mass consciousness underneath the cloak of a scientific fact, it is treated as natural science.

As discussed above, scientific myths emerge from the human desperation to come to an impulsive conclusion, or an individual's need to generalize before even assembling all the facts and decisive information regarding the object of myth. Many a time, the rise of such myths is in connection with a new field of research of which the scientist has minimal knowledge and insufficient proof to validate the outcome. Under the circumstances, empirical hypotheses are proposed and submitted, which initiates comparative research by the researchers in support of their experience regarding the object of study. In the modern world, there are many scientific myths such as the existence of life on other galaxies i.e. alien, the mystery of the Bermuda Triangle, Martian Canals, Moon was a part of Earth, etc.

Scientific myth is a unique example of cultural myth-making, it amalgamates two opposite disciplines – myth and science. There is a significant inference on numerous possibilities for creating such myths. Unlike political myths, scientific myths are not susceptible to change and quickly get embedded in a person's consciousness; like ancient myths, scientific myths can be passed down from generation to generation, until invalidated by reliable scientific facts and research.

CONCLUSION

Through analysis, the question which arises is whether myths are still playing a role in informing people how to live and co-exist with one another in today's society. The answer is yes and this paper confirms the hypotheses of existence, influence, and circulation of myths and myth-making in the modern world. In the contemporary world, myths are still vast, stirring the society's cultural and philosophical aspects and individual thinking. People are willfully accepting these myths in the form of stereotypes and prejudices.

Certainly, the perception and implication of myths are unquestionably distinct from ancient times. Even though many people still believe myths to be heroic sagas and legends of gods and godly heroes of the past. The presence of myths, after attentive examining the human world, can be found in the reality of human surroundings. Myths are everywhere, in city names, everyday phrases, arts and architecture, politics, as well as science. Some of the examples are: cities like Atlanta which comes from Atlantis, and Athens, both are connected to ancient mythology which dates back to ancient Egypt and Greece. Similarly, phrases like "Achilles' heel", "Midas touch", "Godly hour", "lightning bolt", have become part of common vernacular, sometimes people use these phrases without even realizing or recognizing their source.

The sheer philosophical comprehension of the myths materializes from socio-cultural alterations and a shift in the point of view of an individual himself, which is an amalgamation of forced and sometimes explicitly constructed and implemented mythologization of civil cognizance. Even though in modern times, the mere significance, objective, function, and status of myths have endured fundamental changes; from the archaic era to the contemporary time, myth-making faced a shift from spiritual, mystical, and philosophical to rational, experimental, and hypothetical. Myths of the past are still embedded in the human psyche and its influence can

be witnessed in society's functioning, daily life routine of an individual, in creative arts, science, culture, and even politics.

REFERENCES

- Cotterell, Arthur, Storm, Rachel. *The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Mythology*. Annes Publication Ltd, China. 2017.
- Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*. Translated in Text: Robin Hard. Oxford University Press, New York. Reissued 2008.
- Dictionary of Classical Mythology*. Penguin Books, 1991.
- Fry, Stephen. *Mythos: The Greek Myths Retold*. Penguin Books, 2018.
- Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Myth=Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology*. Penguin Books India, 2006
- Campbell, Joseph, Moyers, Bill. *The Power of Myth*. Ed. Betty Sue Flowers. USA: Anchor Books, 1991.
- Smith, Jonathan Z., Buxton, Richard G.A. and Bolle, Kees W. "Myth". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 3 Nov. 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/myth>.
- Mathis, J. "The Contemporary Lives of Age-Old Tales: Characters, Contexts, and Critical Issues." (2019). Frye, Northrop. "The Archetypes of Literature." (2007).
- Bidney, David. "Myth, Symbolism, and Truth." *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 68, no. 270, 1955, pp. 379–392. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/536765. Accessed 14 Mar. 2021.
- Barash, Jeffery Andrew. "Myth in History, Philosophy of History as Myth: On the Ambivalence of Hans Blumenberg's Interpretation of Ernst Cassirer's THEORY OF MYTH." *History and Theory*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2011, pp. 328–340. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41300098.
-