

Leveraging Myth and Folklore to View the Present via the Lens of the Past

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Abstract: *Selecting myth, legend, and folklore as a topic is not a simple task; in order to connect the historical account or mythological reality with the current situation, extensive and thorough study and brainstorming are necessary. Moreover, creating people from gods requires a great deal of effort and commitment. Furthermore, a writer's true skill is shaping the myth that seems to be shared by all of them in accordance with the goal they are attempting to achieve. Mythological literature is frequently associated with historical realities, but with easily verifiable facts not necessarily. Mostly, mythology is used by writers to reclaim history, though sometimes they also question its historicity. Numerous instances of Indian writers using mythology to further their goals as fiction writers may be found in the field of Indian literature in English, whether they are writing in India or another country. This essay examines how certain Indian writers have employed mythology, as well as how different writers have interpreted the same mythical narrative. The article begins with Raja Rago and continues with Girish Karnad, Shashi Tharoor, and ends with modern writers like Dr. Devdutt, Kalyan Rao, and Kavita Kané. This study primarily examines epic works such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, but it also considers several lesser-known mythological tales that have their origins in Southern India. In addition, the research considers Indian women authors' perspectives on the recounting of Indian stories.*

Keywords: *Historiography, Indian Writing, Mythology, Re-imagination, Religion.*

According to the Oxford Dictionary 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." Tradition and history are two terms in this definition that need to be discussed. A significant degree of the myth's inseparability and closeness with the location, the community, the culture, and the people in whom it is anchored comes from its relationship

with tradition and history. There are indeed cases when many civilisations place so much trust in myths and tales that they see them as accurate and authentic accounts of their otherwise distant history. They contrast their myths and stories with the past by putting them all together. That being said, a myth cannot be interpreted as the authentic historical narrative; in fact, the very term "myth" suggests that the tale is imaginary and made-up. It is certain that myths are closely linked to

religious customs that are often spiritual in origin, as well as to the cults and rituals that accompany them. Lauri Honko, a Finnish folklorist, provides a fairly thorough explanation of myth in this context, stating:

“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.”

Myths, passed down orally, are dynamic and adapt to various viewpoints and circumstances. They evolve over time due to transmission across cultural boundaries or shifts in religious beliefs. Some literary and historical works may take on characteristics that are otherwise mythical. The term "myth" has been historically used to describe the religious and cultural beliefs of other civilizations and faiths as imaginary and false. However, mythology studies myths in general and a body of myths connected by a common theme. For example, Greek, Roman, Hindu, Christian, and Jewish mythology is all connected by a common theme, all of which are categorised under less than one heading.

Folklore is the genre that includes mythology. It is made up of the underlying tales or narratives of a community and its members. Gods,

demigods, and other supernatural creatures are common characters in myths. The genre of tales, which centre on the lives of common people—mostly leaders—is closely related to the genre of myths. Myths are as ancient as thinking about tales and human mind itself, so if we try to trace their origins, we can wind up tracing the history of human life. This is a fitting place for Freud's observation that myth is "the great primordial truth, the precipitate of the unconscious" (quoted in Sankaran 1). The concept of the unconscious and the vocabulary around it are outside the purview of sound reasoning and verifiability. But people have always shown a strong inclination to try to make sense of the environment around them and themselves. Stated differently, curiosity has been a major factor in the advancement of cultures and civilisations. Myths have proven useful in occupying and fitting the voids left by reasonable explanations when they don't fit. Interpreting myth in these capacities, Elina Helander-Renvall remarks, “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.”

Myths, which have their origins in the oral storytelling tradition, have been an invaluable source of inspiration for both ancient performers and later authors of literature. They also continue to

contribute ideas and material to literary works. For example, English literature heavily references Greek and Roman tales, even though these texts were not initially written in the language. Because myths are such rich sources of meaning, authors either utilise them directly or make references to them in order to imbue their own writing with significance. Put another way, myth functions as an allegory and a metaphor in literature. Many authors, including Shakespeare, Milton, Yeats, Eliot, Kafka, Golding, Lawrence, and Joyce, make references to old myths to convey the tensions and issues that surround their characters or the eras they live in, as well as to try and find some sort of resolution in the end. According to Joseph Strelka of New York State University, Albany, "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."

Comparative mythology is a tool used by many writers to methodically compare myths from various civilisations. Finding the common thread that unites disparate civilisations is the goal. Similar to this, a lot of authors compare and contrast the current with the myths that already exist in an attempt to understand the present mythically. There have been cases where authors have turned to myth and folklore to help them reconcile with their past and separate themselves from the present.

The Waste Land, a ground-breaking poem by T.S. Eliot, is a parody of mythologies. To express the anxiety

brought on by modernism, Eliot interweaves legends from the Bible, Europe, Hinduism, and other cultures. He had a workable tool to depict the intricacy, disarray, and complexity inherent in contemporary society thanks to the mythological technique. Yeats' poetry is full of references to Christian and Gaelic mythology; Milton takes inspiration from biblical mythology; and Shakespeare incorporates a lot of Greek and Roman mythology.

Myth, religion, and history are intertwined in Indian culture. Consequently, mythology and legend are intrinsic to Indian culture. As V.S. Naipaul notes: "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." 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 unproblematic." Indian authors, especially those who produce postcolonial English prose and fiction, heavily reference Indian myths and tales to imbue their works with vitality and vitality. Plays by Girish Karnad, such as Yayati, Hayavadan, Nagamandala, Fire and Rain, and The Serpent and the Rope by Raja Rao, for instance, rely on myths for their own existence in order to capitalise on the emotional, figurative, historical, and symbolic qualities of mythology. Actually, many Indian writers of

popular fiction have researched and used Indian mythology and tales in their works, including Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Vikram Chandra, Amish Tripathi, Amitav Ghosh, Ashwin Sanghi, Devdutt Pattanaik, and many more diasporic writers of Indian descent. There's a reason why Indian authors of English never delve into the myths and stories that their European counterparts do. Indian authors are closer to the mythology that originates in their own country than are Western writers. As Meenakshi Mukherjee put it, they "are still closer to their mythology than the modern Irish or British people who are to Celtic folk-lore or Greek legends." "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," are the two main ways, according to her, that mythical material is included into Indian English literature.(41) Regarding Raja Rao, he employs a "digressional" usage of myth in his books, such as *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965), and *Kanthapura* (1938). On the other side, Rushdie, Anita Desai, and others use myth to juxtapose the past and present in order to make sense of the chaos of the modern world.

Their political goals and fates are greatly influenced by the mythological past, which they perceive as a source of immense intellectual and creative force. Furthermore, myths provide a solid base with the support of a lived experience that is clear about what may be the repercussions of anything with a significant degree of certainty, in

contrast to the future, which is unclear and unpredictable. The scope is broad; myths offer a wide range of examples and instances, whether it is related to governance challenges, power and justice concerns, ideal society and its ruler concepts, or the dynamics governing gender relations in society. In general, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* are two important Indian epics that have inspired countless retellings and reimagining in the Indian socioliterary sphere. These epics focus on males in general, but they also especially address the lives of royal men and the battles they fight. Themes from the Vedas, Upanishads, and other Buddhist texts are also a source of inspiration for writers. The lives and struggles of royal men, such as princes and kings, are also depicted in various Tamil epics, such as *Silappatikaram* and *Manimekalai*, which are likewise mostly concerned with matters of politics, government, and power. The distinction, though, is that they also include regular women in the lead parts; they are not just focused on males.

The literary genre of mythology thrillers is becoming quite popular in India. In fact, they have evolved into a genre unto itself as a result of several authors using myth to express their creativity. These authors employ myths to make readers feel patriotic or to make satire and humour in order to poke fun at particular societal mores.

One of the greatest Indian authors to write in English in the middle of the 20th century, Raja Rao, is credited with creating the excellent mythological adaption *Kanthapura* in 1938. Drawing

comparisons between the Indian independence movement and the Gandhian revolution and Lord Rama's battle and army's march to save his bride Seeta from Ravana's palace, Rao makes allusions to the Ramayana. As one example, 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." R.K. Narayan juxtaposes ideas from popular mythology with recognisable, contemporary situations and characters. In *The Man Eater of Malgudi*, for example, he very cleverly uses the tale of Bhasmasura. Most people view Bhasmasura as the demon who turns to self-destruction. The asur is the epitome of the contemporary man who is out to ruin creation. In light of this, Srinivasa Iyengar notes: "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?"

Girish Karnad, a renowned Indian playwright, is considered one of the

three major writers of contemporary Indian drama, alongside Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar. He often uses mythology and history to address contemporary issues, contrasting the past with the present. Karnad uses myth's strength to express the richness, diversity, and intricacy of contemporary existence, giving his writings a philosophical and cosmic relevance. He heavily relied on the Mahabharata, released in 1951, and grew up in Karnataka, where he saw street performances and Western theatre. This exposure to Indian myths and stories enticed him to recount them against the backdrop of contemporary culture. Karnad uses myth in an unusual way, creating characters with existential, intellectual, and psychological struggles. He also challenges the myths' contemporary relevance and conventional values in a subtle but indirect manner. 1961 saw Karnad publish *Yayati* at the age of 23. This is an account of King Yayati's life, one of the Pandavas' forefathers. Shukracharya, enraged by Yayati's adultery, condemns him to an early death. Yayati asks his sons to offer their youth as a cure, and one of them accepts to make the sacrifice. Karnad makes fun of life's ironies in this drama by using Mahabharata characters. Soon after its publication, it was translated and presented in six additional Indian languages, enjoying enormous and immediate popularity. The drama was also translated into Hindi for Satyadev Dubey's theatrical adaptation, in which the renowned actor Amrish Puri performed as the lead. Eminent Indian author and politician Shashi Tharoor skilfully blends myth and fiction in his writing. He uses the Mahabharata as a

suitable framework in *The Great Indian Novel* to illustrate the return of Mahatma Gandhi to India in 1915, as well as Indira Gandhi's second prime ministership in the early 1980s, the state of "emergency," and its aftermath. "My fiction seeks to reclaim my country's heritage for itself, to tell, in an Indian voice, a story of India" the author declares. It was By utilising the mythical structure, Tharoor juxtaposes historical figures with mythological figures in his writing. He uses historical figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, for instance, and compares them to their epic equivalents from ancient India. As a result, the story is set in both historical and legendary period concurrently. Using this structure, he problematises historical knowledge by challenging the Western historiographic tradition. Here, Linda Hutcheon's suggestion seems to be entirely appropriate: "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." Devdutt Pattanaik is another writer who uses myth in an unusual way. He has a talent for mixing old notions with the contemporary environment. He looks to several Indian epics for suggestions about business and trade. Among his publications are *Handbook of Hindu Mythology*, *Myth=Mithya Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayan*, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharat*, *Shikhandi: and the other Tales they don't Tell You*, *My Gita*, *Seven Secrets of Shiva*, *The Book of Ram*, and *Seven Secrets of Vishnu*, etc.

According to him, myth is "basically a shared cultural understanding of the world that unites people and communities." This comprehension might be secular or religious (Myth=Mithya 39). Amish Tripathi is a playwright known for his *Shiva Trilogy*, which combines myth, history, and fiction. The trilogy, consisting of *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, and *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, explores the concept of gods as real people who achieved godhood through good actions and karma. Tripathi suggests that gods' names represent shared attributes and values among common people, who could become great leaders and deities. He believes that those considered gods have existential angst and seek to understand the universe. The trilogy serves as a metaphor for understanding the complex relationship between science, religion, and myth. The uncle of Shiva is told in *The Secret of the Nagas*, "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."

Devdutt Pattanaik says something similar in this context: "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)

Indian author Kavita Kané is known for her mythology-fiction works, such as Lanka's Princess, Menaka's Choice, Sita's Sister, and Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen. These works provide a female perspective on myths and their significance, highlighting underappreciated female characters in Indian epics. One notable work is Sita's Sister, which tells the story of Urmilla, Lakshmana's bride, who is left alone in a fourteen-year exile. The novel offers a new perspective and portrays her bravery, strength, and determination. Kané uses myth to express her feminist beliefs. Chitra B Divakaruni also uses myth to tell the Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi, blending myth, history, and feminism in her book The Palace of Illusions. In his fictional writings, Ashwin Sanghi blends mythology, theology, and history. As the title of the work implies, he exploits the tale of Chanakya to go back in time to a time when mythology had an impact on society. Chanakya is associated with strategists who use both cunning and intelligence to prepare for the sake of the State. In the book, Pandit Gangasagar Mishra, Chanakya's fictitious counterpart, gives life to the character. According to Sanghi, myths are ideal metaphors for elucidating ideas like karma and the cause-and-effect formula. Consequently, the myth becomes an explanation of the human experience and the issues connected with it in the reality that is remote from the tale, rather than limiting its significance to the narrative itself. "Myth ceases to be merely primitive and becomes universal. It ceases to be false

and becomes true. It depicts the human condition."

Indian authors often use myth, folklore, and legend to address contemporary issues or to critically examine historical circumstances that led to those issues. Kalyan Rao's Telugu-original novel, The Untouchable Spring, tells the story of Hindu Dalits, lower caste members, who are oppressed by upper-class Hindus. The story begins with the tale of the cow, "Kamadhenu," where a god curses a class and its offspring into miserable Dalits. The gods condemn the offender, declaring they will live in the Kaliyuga era, where goddess Kali would rule supreme and consume the flesh of dead cows. Rao uses a critical analysis of the myth to understand the ongoing subjugation and mistreatment of Dalits, who were previously classified as untouchables. The book has received positive reviews and has been translated into English. Indian society is predominantly defined by tradition and orthodoxy, to the extent that modernity and tradition occasionally collide as well as overlap. Both the collision and the reliance are made pretty clear in literature as well. Indian writers derive so much inspiration for their works from their abiding sense of connection to their history and culture. Symbols and motifs for their paintings are subconsciously drawn from Hindu mythology in particular. They modernise the past and decontextualize the present by fusing mythology with the contemporary. It is this contradiction that has given rise to timeless works of literature and art. Indian authors have been utilising mythology in ever-more-intriguing and inventive ways to retell stories that are

connected to it. Recently, the emphasis has been on delving further into the supporting cast members' backstories. Using myths and legends not only enhances the artistic creation but also helps writers put their new work within the greater body of literature from their own culture or region as well as other cultures.

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