

Discerning Myth-Making

Dr. Shreeja Tripathi Sharma

Assistant Professor of English

Department of Higher Education

Madhya Pradesh, India

shreeja.sharma@gmail.com

Abstract

The myths of several world cultures display an interestingly common structure. This has inspired several myth critics to discern the coded expression of myths. The changing norms of modern myth-making provide greater liberty to the myth-makers, who are induced to break free from the common interface of parallel structures. Consequently, the evolving scenario of remoulded myths necessitates new parameters of assessment.

Keywords: Myth criticism, Archetypal criticism, Mythopoeia, Myths, Mythological fiction

Discerning myths is a puzzle for both readers and critics. The stories riddled with symbols, allegories, archetypes, layered expression and metaphoric content curiously intrigue a reader's mind. It is a fact rather peculiar that myths of parallel cultures display shared traits in their literary structure. This consequentially led myth-critics to make assessments based on parameters like shared structure and recurrent patterns in varied literary divisions such as plot, character and themes etc.

The critical structure of the myth is changing again, being re-fashioned by the hands of modern myth-makers. In the wake of the upsurge in the production of myths on the digital-scape, the nuances of myth-making are adapting to cater to the altering palate of the audience. While the ancient myths gave the myth-maker the authority to stick to conventions, the

modern myths have given him the autonomy to break free. In a changed scenario, where the author takes a back seat to let the reader drive on and decide where he would like to go, the narrative is shaped more out of the collective taste of the age than out of sentiments like loyalty towards following conventions. The 'mytho-scape' is therefore clothing on a new form.

The myth-maker of our day must learn to manoeuvre rather than drive. While he gets the autonomy to redefine the conventions, his own creative impulses are rejected and moulded by readership. The modern myth-maker, therefore, is not short of a paradox.

In succession to their role as stipulators of forms, the myth-makers are witnessing a change. The myths as they survive today with parallel structures, were traditionally passed on orally to begin with. The more docile generation of listeners absorbed the contents of the myths and passed them on with minimal distortion in an obedient collective effort to retain its structure. The reason why the myths could retain a common structure or other shared traits in their anatomical structure is therefore apparent. The most significant essentially being the innate archetypal tendency of our collective unconscious to unravel similar expression in forms of story-telling and art. Apart from the innate conditioning of the human mind, the collective pattern of human behaviour naturally selected myth-makers who were knowledgeable and well-read as a pre-requisite, and also those who followed the conventions of writing without much deviation. The creativity of a conventional myth-maker lay in the uniqueness of his speech and expression and he usually did little to play with norms, form or structure.

The conventional myth-makers imparted myth-making a specific structure and were in turn influenced by it. The norms of myth-making spontaneously made it possible for the myths to be based on a common ground that stretched almost entirely over the globe.

Intrigued by the similarities embedded in myths from different cultures, myth-critics began to borrow ideas from philosophers and psychologists, notably from C.G. Jung, to evolve a scientific pattern for the study of myths. The close of the nineteenth century witnessed an upsurge in curious scholars who undertook to discern myths.

In 1890, Sir James Frazer published *The Golden Bough*, a book that gave a blurry yet scientifically inspired structure for analysing myths. This was a time of burgeoning trade and navigation, and the travels naturally brought greater access to myths from different cultures. Soon, there was a kindling interest in scholars who wanted to study comparative myths to discern similar traits in diverse cultures. Despite their fascination, the comparative study of myths was neither easy nor relatively accessible for their age. Nevertheless, the efforts didn't cease, and after a brief gap, another notable book titled *From Ritual to Romance* was published by Jessie Weston in 1920. The book gained considerable scholarship and was famously alluded to by Eliot in *The Wasteland*.

The saga of discerning myths continued and reached a turning-point from a literary perspective when Maud Bodkin published her thesis, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*, in 1934. She garnered critical acclaim for developing literary motifs that typified "eternal durability" appearing in "plot patterns" and "character types." Her work inspired an array of budding myth critics who were primarily concerned with developing a scientific schema for identifying common patterns in myths from different parts of the world. However, the magnanimity of the scope mostly jilted their efforts, as it required grasping an inexhaustible amount of literature, as well as acquiring basic knowledge of different languages and cultures. To say the least, this was not possible without exceptional human effort, given the state of technical support available to them then.

Despite severe limitations, Northrop Frye, a Canadian literary critic, published *The Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957. Frye extended the scope of myth criticism by introducing an analytic schema for the syntactic analysis of the texts, and put forth novel ideas such as treating an individual text as a small subset of the entire body of literature.

What Frye explored through the faculty of criticism; Joseph Campbell had done as a mythologist of exceptional calibre. The concept of 'monomyth' that he proposed in his popular book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, became a popular facet of myth-criticism. Both Frye and Campbell witnessed myth-criticism reach its zenith, beyond which the zealous study of myths began to slow down and is nearly in waiting for a successor.

The probable cause behind the withering down of this habit seems to be linked with the trailing foothold of colonialism. The ambitious project of trying hard to understand the Orient through myths and by drawing comparisons on familiar home-town terrain had chiefly been the pursuit of Occidental scholars. The freedom of the colonies also meant this interest gradually withered. Understandably, post the mid-twentieth century, the efforts of myth critics were muffled.

The engagement with discerning myths began to fade with the influx of change. However, the rising popularity and transforming norms of production of mythological fiction present new dimensions for revamping the dying art of myth-critics.

The myth-maker today derives a common structure from conventional myths but takes liberty of experimentation in designing his own narrative. As a result, the structural mythic fabric both shapes and gets shaped in return. The myth-maker today is governed by ways of 'mythopoeia' and inevitably necessitates the redefinition of mythic parameters in the context of newly emerging texts and formats.

Reading the myth collectively as a part of a common story is consequently more challenging in the context of sporadic bursts of individual creative expression. The myth-maker of our day is free to recreate myths and what he builds is a concoction of elements retained from the ensuing structure of conventions, blended with fresh ingredients from his personal repository, and finally smoothly shaped with his own life-giving hands. The myth-maker now is not a novice, habituated to following tried and perfected recipes; he has evolved into a creator who is set to mould the formula to cater to the evolving palate. The task of discerning myths hereafter necessarily calls for fresh parameters of assessment. With the inevitably dissolving mythic structure and re-definition of myth-makers, what can now be more practically discerned is not myth or its maker but the dynamic, evolving process of myth-making.

References

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