

## Myth Theory: A Study towards Mythic Tale and It's Reach in Today's Life

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### Abstract

Myth can vaguely be said to have come into existence due to the urge of seeking answers to curious mind about the universe, nature, man or can be the result emerged from the need for religious stability of societal control using certain customs and rituals. Myth when looked with a proper outlook can be termed as meaningful, for it beholds metaphysics, the branch of philosophy that deals with the first source of things, including intangible concepts such as being, identity, time and space in its primary sense while developing close proximity to immediate perception of reality. The universal belief system is held and disseminated with a certain amount of pompousness in language and settings, based on mythic stories of a clan or

cult. The purpose of this paper is to establish mythic tales as a vital ingredients for posterity to look upon and validate that the re-reading of mythic tales into fiction opens up a variety of possibilities, including: various perspectives and dimensions to the same story portrayed in/as legendary texts. Humanistic consideration is brought about by individual representation. There are a variety of ways to look at the philosophy that has been passed down through the generations through stories.

Keywords: Myth, Mythic Tales, Re-Interpretation, Sociological aspect, Pedagogical value.

*With Myth, Everything Becomes Possible*

-Claude Levi Strauss

#### 1) Introduction:

Right from the meaning to definition of the word myth, it is spread across like a huge mass pondered on by eminent thinkers, anthropologists, mytho-graphers, philosophers, psychologists to writers and scientist. Philosophies and theories outpour clarity on myths that appear in various forms as ballads, fairy tales, folklore, legends, mythic or sometimes sacred stories. The article seeks a quick glimpse of the definition, characteristics and dimension of myth tracing along with prominent theories. The anthropologists and psychologists views are also considered giving way to dilution towards mythic genres: epic and its re rendering is also pondered for better lucidity. The article mainly aims to bring into notion that the re-reading of myths into fiction gives many aspects to visit such as:

1. Varied dimension and outlook to the same stories presented in/as the mythic texts
2. Individual portrayal brings humanistic consideration
3. Present ways to see the philosophy passed through tales
4. Rendering characteristics to character portrayed along with,
5. Modern view to accept and counterview the accepted with certain amount of clarity
- 6.

## 2) Defining Myth:

Mythic stories of a clan or cult collected from mythology; holds and spreads the belief system with certain amount of pompousness in language and situations. Mythology is often treated as timeless and universal. For ages the stories penetrated in the form of epics, ballads, fables, fairy tales and short stories. There had been several attempts to define myth, which is in fact indefinable.

a. According to the Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms, myths are stories of origin or authorship accompanying or helping to explain religious beliefs. “Often (though not necessarily) their subject is the exploits of a god or hero” (Childs and Fowler 146).

b. Myth as per Merriam Webster dictionary is a story that is usually of unknown origin and at least partially traditional that ostensibly relates historical events usually of such description “as to serve to explain some particular event, institution or natural phenomenon” (Merriam Webster).

c. In *A Glossary of literary terms/ Seventh edition*, M. H. Abrams notes, “that myth in classical Greek, *mythos* signified any story or plot, whether true or invented. In its central modern significance, however, a myth is one story in a mythology—a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives” (Abrams 171).

d. In *A Handbook of Greek Mythology*, Rose states, “Myths, in the proper sense, are

a somewhat primitive form of those mental processes which, further developed, give us both art and science. Of the two sides, the more active is what we may term the artistic or imaginative and visualizing process” (Rose 8).

e. Andrew Lang, in *Custom and Myth*, defines mythology as “the quest for a historical condition of the human intellect to which the element in myths, regarded by us as irrational, shall seem rational enough.” Partly the intellect and physic condition is still been carried along by all” (Andrew Lang).

f. In *The Rhetoric of Religion*, Kenneth Burke argues that myth is the transformation of metaphysics into story. “Myth is characteristically a terminology of quasi-narrative term for the expressing of relationships that are not intrinsically narrative, but circular or tautological” (Burke 258).

g. As for the impact of myth on Human psyche, American psychoanalyst, Jacob Arlow in his article, *Ego psychology and the study of mythology* observes that myth contributes more to the normal development than fantasy, mind or imagination. “The myth is a particular kind of communal experience. It is a special form of shared fantasy, and it serves to bring the individual into relationship with members of his cultural group on the basis of certain common needs. Accordingly, the myth can be studied from the point of view of its function in psychic integration- how it plays a role in warding off feelings of guilt and anxiety, how it constitutes a form of adaptation to reality and to the group in which the individual lives, and how it influences the crystallization of the individual identity and the formation of the superego” (Arlow 375).

Various schools claimed to have the one key by which all myths could be interpreted: for Max Müller, all myths were distorted forms of solar and lunar theories; for Edward Tylor mythology was primitive science, talking of natural phenomena in anthropomorphic terms; for James Frazer, all of myth’s metaphors referred to the cycle of nature and agriculture. Thus

myth altogether can be said to be filled with wonderful substances, the supreme surviving treasure in the form of stories, fables. Even as a form of verbal art that holds a message paving way to representation in writing lending signification to whosoever crosses by. It varies with scientific conceits since its prime focus is with the world that man created- myth with fiction and displacement.

a. “Myth has its own world concerned with own laws and realities; archetypes create myths...that influence and characterize whole nations and epochs of history” (G.Jung 79). It is an image through which the world makes sense to us. Science even can be looked upon as has taken birth from myth; call it due to the insufficient or unrealistic reason that myth stated or due to the urge of further reasoning.

b. Myth holds beliefs with certain amount of truth hidden. This very tendency makes it more bend towards fantasy and falsehood. “The meaning of the myth when read, not as prehistory, but as referring to man's inward spiritual state” (Campbell 19). The factual content needs probing rather intellectual realisation which then enables to witness new endowed light of imagination filled with valuable lessons.

c. Roland Barth, the renowned French Philosopher affirms that, “myth is a system of communication, that it is a message” (Barthes 107). According to him myth is a type of speech in its basic form and that it is not just any genre with stories but is a message to uphold. The extraordinary trait of myth is to portray an ethos or set of values as if it is an ordinary way of the world, when in reality it is no more than another man-made perspective. Myth communicates the objective laid by its teller (whoever may it be) and thus cannot be seen as description of the normal circumstances happening around the world.

Observation: Almost all the interpretations point towards the fact that the enigmatic language in mythic stories, when exposed holds a deeper and wider implication. The symbolic or metaphoric code which lay beneath the embellished content when perceived reveals layers

of meanings giving life lessons. The details that many scholars kept probing for the one true key; the one true meaning behind the mythical metaphor, reveals the struggle between self and the other, the battle for self-realisation and control.

Myth is that deep rooted thought in each one of us that converts into ideas that the mind deliver to act in social contexts. It may or may not hold facts but contains meaning in paramount for all sphere of life. It may be oral or story may hold message of significance for generations and with variety of dimensions and implications.

### 3) Purpose with conceptual framework:

Fact remains that heart holds primitive nuances. It holds stories that can be literally true or may be metaphoric. “To say that the myth is a central if unrecognised part of our daily lives appears, to the casual reader, to be saying that our basic institutions are built upon a lie. This is a hard saying, but there may be some truth in it” (Monro 115). Explanation of the deeper truth and at the same time making it obscure is what myth does on one look. When probed again it beholds the base culture, value and socio-economical as well as political guidance on which human existence can count and cherish.

a. Myth, Mythology to Fiction: Collecting stories from literary and archaeological evidence, examining their functions based on the narrator and spectators (character or society); comparing the motif and tradition to finally assessing the significance and traces of truth is the prime nature of mythology. The function of myth is to comprehend the incomprehensible, to validate the present social system and rituals and to elucidate moral principles and values through exploits of heroism traced in the past.

The fact that myth is nowadays seen getting un-bottled from the genre mythology and is sharing space with fiction is indeed a poignant change. C.Kerenyi in *Prolegomena* section of *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, states, “If we want to promote a real knowledge of mythology, we must not appeal at the outset to theoretical considerations and judgements.

Neither should we talk over much of sources. The water must be fetched and drunk fresh from the spring if it is to flow through us and quicken our hidden mythological talents” (Kerenyi and Jung 6). The thought from whomsoever myths came down may not be traceable, surely though, clarity remains in the mind of the receiver. And with the share of environmental, societal, traditional, cultural and individual contribution adds more to interpretations.

b. Four Dimensions: The *earth* is made of matter and energy, but the *world* is made of stories- myths. According to Dr. Patrick Mahaffey, we live in an emblematic actuality that necessitates human interpretation, but the earth is a material occurrence. Myths give us tales and pictures that make our life more understandable and meaningful, both individually and collectively. Mythology, or the study of myths, provides us with a key to unlocking “four dimensions of our life:

1. The mystery of life that transcends appearances and cannot be expressed adequately in language.
2. An image of the cosmos that is our environmental habitat.
3. The social context or matrix that scripts and encodes the roles we perform amidst others.
4. The inner story that gives our personal lives purpose and meaning” (Mahaffey).

Another significant point by German intellectual historian Hans Blumenberg in his work, *Work on Myth* (published 1979, translated 1985) intends that: the role of myth is to aid human beings handle the inexorability of given reality, a need that is not outmoded by scientific advances and rationality; that myths evolve according to a “Darwinism of words”, with those forms and variations surviving that prove able to cope most effectively with the changing social environment; and that myth is best conceived not as a collection of fixed and final stories, but as “a work”—an ongoing and ever-changing process that is expressed in oral and written narratives and includes the diverse ways in which these narratives are received and appropriated (Abhrams 171).

The preserved stories further evolve and take various shapes as per the requirement of time. The once oral form with limited audience and place, when touched by figures and words transcended mind and space. The increased reach brought increased speculations as well as amazement with varied genres primarily fiction began exploiting mythic stories.

#### 4) Insights by Theorists

The chief perception that myth provides is psychological commitments clad in language that generation can interpret in their own convenience and as per their understandings.

a. Four Key Procedures: In *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell connects the purpose of myth primarily with four operations. The function of myth does not restrict to only individual but extends towards the society. Myth serves the consciousness of the individual which influences the society and the individuality compliments and promotes balance and completeness.

##### i. Chief Functions/ Operations

Individual seeking aspects of life can relate primarily with four function of myth which is interrelated between mystical, cosmological, sociological and pedagogical.

1. Mystical function: evoking the transcendent mysteries through stories, realising the wonders of universe.
2. Cosmological function: the dimension that is valued by science. Science seeks answers to the mystical and mysterious bring pathway to science to explore.
3. Sociological function: validating and reinforcing social order- ethical law towards incorporating and familiarising individual to the community.
4. Pedagogical function: myth can act as an accord to blend with the wisdom that can be derived for element in nature to survive with support and power.

For mythical narratives can lead and teach how to live life under any circumstances. Also make acquaint us into awareness, exploration and comprehending self in connection to personal-cum communal evolvement.

Its primeval elements, narration can be used as a great tool to work on the present life, mannerism and activities of mankind. The stories amassed in mythological perspective stores within the foundational record metaphoric cum symbolic diction and imagery. These aspects when charted in particular culture, promote emotional belief and involvement. Its engagement extends to the world as share of experience to imbibe and its sagacity of humanistic concerns act as base parallels to all human invariable to time and space.

b. Myth and Social Communication: For myth hold social messages, which many anthropologists including Claude Levis Strauss affirms; it cannot be viewed beyond fairy tales, though can express structure that underline human thoughts. The dream of the myth in whichever pattern is conceived can be given modern dress of concept and elucidation. Dreams, myth, work of art, literature, history or theories cannot thus be left as separate entity, they subsist in themselves. Not to counter nor substantiate these symbolic forms is a matter of need. These narratives, may it be writing or oral, emerge out from conscious and unconscious energy. Strauss also argues that myth can be seen as language with a high altitude function that performs complex roles and holds bundle of meaning unlike language of linguistics.

c. Myth and Value for Posterity: Bronislaw Malinowski avows, “Myth is a vital ingredient of human civilisation; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force: it is not an intellectual explanation of artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom” (Malinowski, *The Role of Myth in Life* 366). This can be seen as one of the basic function of myth: to evoke our senses, to delight, to bring balance in thought and action. Not to be considered as mere stories but as stories that lay the basic foundation of our thoughts.

Every individual can identify with the stories that the culture imparts. Mythic stories are sacred for they dwell with reality. They stand the test of time and the characters and the traits are universal.

d. Myth and Literature: Myth is useful in literature as it functions as key essence of literary writings. Northrop Frye in, *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on criticism and society* states that the language of myth is,

“the total vision of human situation, human destiny, human inspirations and fears. The mythology ...reaches us on different level. On the lowest level is the social mythology acquired from elementary education and one’s surroundings, the steady rain of assumptions and values and popular proverbs and clichés and suggested responses that soak into our early life and is constantly reinforced, in our day, by the mass media” (Frye 30).

The use of archetype symbols stand as vision of the primitive mind which is habitual to indulge the imaginative conscience which stands as the core element of literature along with its system supported recurrent pattern.

Myth provide an opportunity to interpret individual and collective experience within a shared (community or cultural) perspective as well as material for creative (secondary) elaboration, paving way to allow understanding one’s own self.

#### Conclusion

Myth theories may be as old and diverse as myth itself. Been unable to stand in isolation, myth merges with various disciplines. When myth relates with philosophy especially in the modern age it cannot be devoid of social sciences. Myths when along with anthropological studies are theories of culture, when with psychology form theories of the mind. The explanatory function of myth reveals the past and deals with the acts of modern characters and rituals. The interlocking tendency of myth acts as a stimulus to culture,

individual and self. Thus the writers no matter whichever age, country or genre they belong to, has a string of affinity towards myth in their works. It serves as a record to what we think and act.

Myth-making skill is inherent in man's nature. Human dispose off one myth for another, sometimes even add to the prevailing myth and sometimes modifies it. The mythic stories holds so vast amount of treasure, one amass as much can hold. When it comes to Indian mythic tales, the two greatest works, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, will embark the adventure of reading the largest book in the world, which A.K. Ramanujan aptly asserts, these texts holds huge mines of wisdom and is infused in our minds, "for it's not a text but a tradition" (Ramanujan, 2004, p. 162). Through the narratives, we come across a fascinating array of characters, situations and motivations that mirror our innermost desires and thoughts that impel us into actions. The twentieth century literature especially Indian literature has witnessed a look back to mythic elements which is been revitalised. The return towards mythic stories is the trend which still prevails. The renowned writers like Bhasa, S.L.Bhyrappa, Tagore, R.K. Narayan, Girish Karnad, M.T. Vasudevan, Shivaji Sawant, Shashi Taroor, Chitra Banerjee, Anand Neelakantan, Devdutt Pattanaik, Amish Tripathy, Kavita Kane, Ashok Banker are to name a few, who have contributed significantly to generate attractiveness to mythological fiction. The mythic stories are taken as the base and is been looked upon with individual circumstances. This has opened propensity to overlook at the situation as mere culprits and focus has shifted towards individual mannerism and features.

Mythic stories were not conceived as points to aid explanation of facts and concepts, the function of been self-explanatory is instilled within the myth which makes it excellent element to study life and mankind in general. This property of the myth makes it mystic. Been self-explainable means holds within it, immense layers of interpretations for whoever has a will to discover. Each reader will have a concept to reveal on the same mythic stories. And the

theories state that most myths are repeated and retouched with revisits. And every revisit brings out plethora of inferences.

The magical spell of the mythical characters ignited the literary imagination of a host of writers in the modern literary scenario. Result is the re-creation and re-defining of mythic characters in their works. Material allusion renders ample scope and liberty for artists to flare up their own understanding and justification.

The use of myth plays a significant role in identifying and correlating with the old understanding and wisdom with the new meaning of human existence. They also portray a fresh dimension of existence through adaptations, digressions and re-rendering of the mythic tales. These tales acts as the transmitter of new emissions through which old ideas either gets re generated or the metaphorical aspects get wings of creativity to head towards the springs of new meanings to interpret that suit the contemporary period. Hence, myths are treasure troves from which lessons of life are drawn and will continue to be drawn.

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