Myth in Early Modern Indian Literature: A Brief Survey

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Abstract:

Novel as a genre may not be necessarily an Indian invention yet as a genre it found favour with Indian writers who adopted and skillfully adapted it to suit their artistic purpose. These native novelists invigorated their works with the help of Hindu mythology as a significant literary device. Whether belonging to the pre-independence or the post-independence period, it has been extremely tempting for every writer to en-cash upon the richness of this perennial reservoir of a country which has been home to an ancient cultural legacy. In a theoretical framework set by the Euro-American critics like C. J. Jung, Northrop Frye, James George Frazer, and T. S. Eliot, this paper intends to present a brief analysis of Hindu mythology as a literary device in the works of Indian writers including Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Raja Rao and R K Narayan. It also aims to discuss the Hindu mythology as a reliable source and a powerful device for expressing the personal and political dilemma of these writers.

Keywords: Myth, pre-independence, post-independence, Hindu mythology, reservoir.

Myths have always fascinated, inspired and provoked the creative impulse of writers across the ages and geographical limits. This preoccupation with myth – whether to create a new one or to reconstruct the old—can be gauged by understanding the relation between the authorial intent behind the myths and their functionality as cultural documents within a continually 'shifting' societal reality. In creating a new myth, an author puts his/her own intention to work through the myth visualized, whereas in the case of re-construction of myths, the palpable functions within the original myth are questioned, challenged, substituted, negated,

reversed or re-focused (Budkuley, 2003). Mythology, as C. J. Jung would prefer to say, is a set of recurring archetypes and patterns which reproduce themselves in an innate, unconscious and universal manner while an individual myth usually refers to a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being or hero or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation, especially one that is concerned with deities or demigods and explains some practice, rite, or phenomenon of nature. (dictionary.com). Mythology is also a system of hereditary stories 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, 1957). Highlighting the inseparable existence of myths in our cultural life, C. G. Jung in his seminal essay, "The Structure of the Unconscious", believes that the collective unconscious is a universal phenomenon and every human being is blessed with this recurring archetype since his birth (Jung 1916). Jung further defines mythology as primordial stage in his celebrated essay "The Structure and Dynamics of Psyche":

> "The collective unconscious - so far as we can say anything about it at all- appears to consist of mythological motifs or primordial images, for which reason the myths of all nations are its real exponents. In fact, the whole of mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious." (Jung, 1960)

Talking about the evolution of cultures, James Frazer, the famous British anthropologist believes that the formation of the myth takes place from primitive stage. The primitive magician becomes first the tribal priest or medicine man, then, as civilization develops, the sacred king of his people, later on in fertility myths the sacred king turns as god-like figure. The cycle of death and rebirth according to Frazer is central among all the mythologies, as we can see the recurring myth of Fisher king and his sacrifice for the noble cause occupies its place in 'The Waste Land'. Northrop Frye also talks about these primordial recurring patterns of human culture in his prominent work "Anatomy of Criticism", which he called 'archetypal patterns'. Frye uses four archetypal patterns: spring (comedy), winter (irony and satire), autumn (tragedy), and summer (romance) to trace the mythological structures.

These recurring patterns of mythology have comprehensively affected the literature of the whole globe. From the time immemorial, these legendary stories have been a path-guiding force to surmount the trauma of the prevalent period. To triumph over the futility of the

modern period, writers sought comfort in mythology to reinstate the moral order. As T. S. Eliot in his poem "The Waste Land" has made a frequent use of archetypal patterns from the whole universe in order to assert the effectiveness of myths in resuscitating the ailing world from its spiritual barrenness. The archetypal images and characters like Fisher King, Tiresias, The Fire Sermon of Buddha, search for the Holy Grail, and the conclusive images from the Upanishads are an attempt to rejuvenate the deteriorating world which has entered into deep jaws of materialism and carnal desires. While praising the writing of James Joyce and his successful attempt at exploring myths, Eliot writes:

> "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." (Eliot 1923)

In the context of Indian mythology and its inextricable relationship with Indian literature, it is very safe to believe that in a country like India where there is not much of a historical tradition –unlike as one finds much in abundance in the Western world-- myth has become a powerful instrument of preservation of both history and culture. C. N. Srinath (2003) rightly argues that such a pervasive, percolated mythical climate has been dynamic in nature with a great potential to merge with and even mould contemporary reality. Myth being ever-present and eternally available, the Indian writer feels proudly privileged to employ these sources in his writings more than his western counterpart. Invariably every Indian writer knowingly or unknowingly refers to the great epics like Ramayana and the Mahabharata, either to build up their narratives or else to subvert and dismantle certain myths. For instance, the Indian writers of pre-Independence era, preoccupied with the colonial subjugation-- chose to employ these myths against the foreign rulers and invoked myths and archetypal prototypes to awake the feeling of patriotism in the masses. Not only the narratives relating to the Freedom struggle, the post-Independence events like the infamous Emergency of 1970's were also taken up by the Indian writers in the light of different Indian myths to express their personal and political situations. As such, this fixation with myths as a potential device has been a characteristic feature of the writers ranging from the nineteenth century Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay to the twenty-first century novelists including Narendra Kohli, Namita

Gokhale and others of the generation. This paper presents a brief survey of some major Indian writers who have enriched the literature with what Eliot calls, a mythical method in their own ingenuous ways.

Set against the so-called Sannyasi Rebellion and the infamous famine of 1770's , Bankim Chandra's magnum opus Anandamath (1883) which is still known for redefining the concept of Nationalism, as also for giving the national song of India, the "Vande Matram (Hail Mother)". Reinforcing the idea of nation as the emotive power necessary for the freedom of the country, Bankim Chandra has skillfully drawn a fitting parallel between Bharat Mata (Mother India) and the mythological mother-goddess Durga (Shakti) – and all this to generate a sense of pride in Indians which would exhort them to protect this country from the hands of oppression of British Government. Characters like Mahendra, Kalyani, Jiban, Shanti, and Mahatma Satyananda knit the microcosm of the whole rebellion against the British guided by the unifying and mythological force of motherland, the Durga. The song "Vande Matram", hailing the motherland, was the combining force for all the Indians to shatter the dirty threads of the British Empire. The effect of the myth of goddess Durga, the motherland is visible in Anandamath,

> "..Let's crush the British rule in India under our feet. Let us burn their sceptre into ashes, and then scatter the ashes to the winds. Brothers, sing Bande Mataram again!"
> (Bankim Chandra, 1882)

The pertinence of the novel increased during the national movement of India. The Partition of Bengal in 1905 instigated unrest among the Nationalists. Instantly they started opposing the British policy of 'Divide and Rule' and arranged plethora of programmes to rescind the Partition of Bengal. The hymn "Vande Matram" became central slogan during this movement. The myth of motherland and driving force of the Shakti Durga made them capable of fighting against such a powerful British Government. The excerpt from the novel depicts this driving force of the myth of Durga, the Shakti which had taken the whole nation by storm:

> "We are not afraid. A man never dies more than once in his life. And what death would it be if it occurs in the service for our Mother. Something worth dying for."
> (Bankim Chandra, 1882)

The essence of the myth of motherland as the guiding force for freedom fighters is conspicuously visible in the novel when the leader of the rebels shows Mahendra the three faces of Bharat Mata (Mother India) as three goddess idols being worshipped in three

consecutive rooms: What Mother Was – An idol of Goddess Jagaddhatri, What Mother Has Become – An idol of Goddess Kali, What Mother Will Be – An idol of Goddess Durga. The eagerness of the rebellions to see the motherland free from the oppression of the British is another central motif in the novel:

> "When, O Master, when shall we see our Mother India in this garb again — so radiant and so cheerful?' 'Only when all the children of the Motherland shall call her Mother in all sincerity." (Bankim Chandra, 1882)

With the emergence of Raja Rao, Indian writing in English seems to have caught up a new height. His writings are abundant with mythological motifs. It was during the time of Freedom Movement under the leadership of Gandhi when Raja Rao skillfully blended mythological figures in his writings to create awareness among people against the British. His novels like Kanthapura and Serpent and the Rope established Raja Rao as a creative artist dealing with the mythical stuff. His contribution as a story teller and as a myth-maker "is seen in the way in which he 'mythologises' contemporary events and lends to them a peculiar native colour and resonance. He draws inspiration from the resources of the Indian myth and legend, episode and anecdote, and creates an ethos all its own". (Mittapalli & Piciucco, 2001)

The uniqueness of Kanthapura lies in its narration as it follows a narrative art typical of the Sthalapurana. If the Ramayana is a narration by saint Valmiki, the Kanthapura -- with the freedom struggle as the backdrop-- is narrated through the persona of an old woman of the village. The mythical story of Ram's victory over Ravana runs parallel in the novel only to reinforce the eternal belief in the victory of good over evil. Gandhi has been compared to the exiled Lord Ram while the enslaved country stands for the kidnapped Sita in Ravana's Lanka. As Ravana, the snatcher of Sita's freedom is none other than the British who caught away with India's sovereignty. Gandhi's triumph over the British signifies Ram's victory over the demon king of the golden land. The Mahatma's round table conferences in England have been compared with the epic hero's campaigns against Lanka. Metaphoric triumph of Gandhi over the red-man with the help of his weapons ahimsa, satyagrahas and swadeshi is symbolic of triumph of Rama over Ravana with the help of the Vanar sena (monkeys' army). The place called Kanthapura has been attributed with a mythical connotation to signify Ayodhya, the holy seat of the divine king. Thus, each character in the novel takes after someone or the other in the mythical story. No doubt, Gandhi has been placed in the novel as an epitome of Godliness and divinity of Ram, while the villages significant enough for carrying a legend and myth of their own:

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I n d e x e d ,   P e e r   R e v i e w e d   &   R e f e r e e d   J o u r n a l

> "There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich Sthala-Purana, or a
> legendary history of its own. Some god or god-like hero has passed by the village –
> Rama might have rested under this papal tree. Sita might have dried her clothes, after
> her bath on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many
> pilgrimages throughout the country, might have slept in his hut." (Kanthapura, 5)

Gandhi has also been credited with the mythological identity of lord Krishna to extirpate the
chains of slavery. Just as Krishna releases the people of Vrindavan from the horror of the
Serpent Kalia, so does Gandhi save the people of India from the fear of the British:

> "You remember how Lord Krishna when he was but a babe of four had begun to fight
> against demons and had killed the Serpent Kali. So too our Mohandas began to fight
> against the enemies of the country…Men followed him, as they did Krishna, the flute-
> player; and so he goes from village to village, to slay the serpent of the foreign rule."
> (Kanthapura, 18)

With nationalism and brotherhood as the writer's prime concern behind creating these
characters and events, Gandhi in Kanthapura appears no less wonderful and charismatic than
his mythical counterpart. It is he alone who has got superhumanly powers to beat the "red-
man" and free the country:

> "They say the Mahatma will go to the Red-Man's country and he will get us Swaraj.
> He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. And we shall be all happy. And Rama will
> come back from exile and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain and Sita
> freed, and he will come back with Sita on his right in a chariot of the air and brother
> Bharatha will go to meet them with the worshipped sandal of the master on his head.
> And as they enter Ayodhya, there will be a rain of flowers." (Kanthapura, 183)

R. K. Narayan, a contemporary of Raja Rao, also employs mythology in his fiction, although
in a slightly different manner. At times ironic, Narayan's plots are based on classical Indian
myths including the Puranas and other Indian scriptures. An extensive and a more ironic
treatment of myths from Indian folklores and legends make Narayan more engrossing and
enchanting than most of his contemporaries. As usual with other Indian writers, R K Narayan
does not feel shy in taking recourse to the great epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana
and weaves his tales in the backdrop of these myths. His novels like The Vendor of Sweets,
The Man-Eater of Malgudi, The Guide, and Swami and Friends among several others offer a
scathing commentary on the state of affairs in the country. The Man-Eater of Malgudi is one
of the most enchanting novels of R. K. Narayan in which the myth of the demon Bhasmasura

has been explored in order to establish a pattern of certain self-destructing developments in the modern times. The novel opens with the protagonist Nataraj and with his two friends Sastri and Sen. Nataraj runs a printing shop in Malgudi where his friends Sen, a poet, and Sastri, a journalist, abide a life full of peace and contentment. Narayan incorporates Bhasmasura myth in the plot where Nataraj as his appellation mentions, is compared with lord Shiva. The nonchalant life of Malgudi is disrupted by the nefarious entry of Vasu, a taxidermist. As Bhasmasura brings destruction in the universe, so the entry of Vasu is an ominous indication of the upcoming upheaval in the serene world of Malgudi. The story goes almost parallel to the mythical structure of the Bhasmasura tale. Bhasmasura yields in the beginning to lord Shiva to attain immortality and later on he is blessed with a boon to transform anyone into ash whom he touches on his head. The boon turns into curse when the demon tries to annihilate none other than lord Shiva alone. Vasu persuades Nataraj and gets his permission to dwell in his attic where he makes mess of everything, bringing the hunted animals from the hills of Mempi without even caring for the real occupant of the premises. Narayan describes the demeanour of Bhasmasura with the same appeal as in the mythology:

> "Then there was a Bhasmasura, who acquired a special boon that everything he touched should be scorched, while nothing could every destroy him. With this special boon he made humanity suffer. Later God Vishnu was incarnated as Mohini, a beautiful dancer with whom the asura turn out to be obsessed. She assured to acquiesce to him merely if he imitated all the gestures and movements of her own dancing. At the end of the dance, Mohini put her palms on her cranium, and the fiend pursued the same gesticulation in absolute forgetfulness and was reduced to ashes that very moment, the blighting touch flattering active on his own cranium. Every man can assume that he is great and will be eternal, but none can speculate from which part his destiny will approach" (The Man-Eaters of Malgudi, 84-85).

The destruction of Vasu like that of Bhasmasura is brought forward by his own actions as he strives to exterminate his own benefactor. The mythical structure is comprehensively knitted by shaping mythical figure of Mohini in Rangi, the temple dancer. Rangi who is technically married to lord Krishna, she can be accepted as an incarnation of lord Vishnu (Mohini). Vasu is hugely fascinated by her and her dancing skills as was Bhasmasura towards Mohini. The rescue of Kumar, the elephant from Vasu by Rangi is symbolic of the description and redemption of the earth from the atrocities of Bhasmasura by Mohini. The climax of the death of Bhasmasura is fulfilled by the self-destruction of Vasu with his own hammer like hands

which he wanted to apply in annihilation of Nataraj. The physical end of Vasu occurs in the very presence of Rangi like that of Bhasmasura's in the presence of Lord Vishnu who had appeared in the guise of Mohini. The novel through its mythological parallel suggests the establishment and restoration of the order in the midst of chaos:

> "Every Rakshasa gets swollen with his ego. He thinks he is invincible, beyond every law. But sooner or later something or other will destroy him. He stood expatiating on the lives of various demons in Puranas to prove his point" (The Man-Eater of Malgudi, 84).

The writers mentioned above have successfully en-cashed the richness of Indian mythology in their works to demonstrate the barrenness of the modern world as also to exhibit the grandeur of the rich cultural legacy of India. Against a mythological backdrop, the work of these writers also strive to fill the spiritual vacuum faced by the modern materialistic civilization, thus advocating a better order and control which the world so badly needs today. While the great classics like Anandamath and Kanthapura were successful in infusing the freedom fighters with the spirit of nationalism and exhorting to overthrow the British rule, works of modern times continue to invigorate the contemporary generation of Indians. As suggested above, the myths – perpetual and ageless as they are, they will always continue to inspire generations of writers and shall remain a powerful device in their skillful hands.

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