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Lt. Lovji K N

Assistant Professor,

Department of English,

Vimala College, Thrissur, Kerala

Myth Socialized: Significance of Myth and Legends in the Select Plays of

Uma Parameswaran

Myth is a fictitious belief fore-grounded in the tradition of the past and that which has led human mind to accept the belief in a conscious manner. Myth is a story involving human limitations and super human strivings and accomplishments which suggest through action man's attempt to express and thus control his anxiety about those features of his psychological and physiological make up and his external environment which he cannot comprehend, accept or master. The characters of myth may be God's men or monstrous creatures' with qualities of both. Today, the playwright's derives their thoughts directly from these and builds up their thought.

Through the use of mythical and puranic element the dramatist teach the public, the moral and instruct them in a philosophical way to know better about life. Whenever there is turmoil in the society and social unrest, awareness to the public is given through the mythical approach. Every dramatist has his/her own approach in instructing the public. If the playwright takes the mythical then he/she is likely to capture the attention of the audience, by giving his vision of thought in regard to the culture that is prevailing at the times.

For Plato, the first known user of the term, mythology meant no more than the telling of stories but in actuality they have some serious underlying purpose beyond that of telling a story. It attempts to interpret, create divinity and religion. They deal with love, war, tyranny, courage,

fate and with the relation of man to those divine powers which are sometimes felt irrational, sometimes to be cruel and sometimes to be just. Indra Nath Chaudary affirms that:

“...Myths are one of the segments which serve to determine the Indianness in our literature.” (22)

The inexhaustible lore of myths, parables and legends that pattern and define our culture offers immense scope for the Indian dramatists as Hary Levin’s says:

Myth at all events, is raw material, which can be the stuff of literature”

(229-230)

Uma Parameswaran , a Canada based Indian writer in English, is known for her plays like *Sons Must Die*, *Meera:A Dance Drama*,*Sita’s Promise:A Dance Drama*, *Dear Deedi*, *My Sister and Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees*, The recipient of the Smith-Mundt Fulbright scholarship for the study of American literature at Indiana University. Uma Parameswaran has always been very sensitive to the cultural heritage and socio-political issues of India. Uma Parameswaran quilts a new canon with her unique sense of individuality and deep rooted Indian sensibility and ends the isolation and silence of her people by giving them a place and voice in Canada for adequate self perception and self assertion. Through this intermingling of cultures she attempts to affect a shift from a sense of rootlessness to a sense of community, from alienation to reconciliation.

Myth has always had a privileged place in literature, as it is highly adaptable form of an ancient concept, which can be re worked to modern ends. Writers of Indian Diaspora have been repeatedly attracted to the rich mine of Indian Mythology for it is deeply embedded in their

psyche. *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharatha* especially are immense reservoirs of narrative potential. They present Uma Parameswaran with a readymade frame work, which allows for an imaginative rendering of the basic design.

In her short story *The Door I Shut Behind Me*, the hero Chander was given a copy of *The Ramayana* and *Bhagavat Gita* by his mother, as he was leaving for Canada. This was probably a metaphor for the great epics Uma Parameswaran always carried in her heart and in the springs of her creativity. She has consciously re worked two important texts of Indian literary repertoire- the stories of Meera and Rama-Sita. They indicate the passion with which she represents the characters and the message from the greater resources of her native culture to an alien audience. Moreover it is an attempt to reclaim from her culture some roots to clutch, in the metaphysical bareness that confronted her in her migration from a spiritual to a materialistic culture.

Uma Parameswaran's competence and aptitude in dance and drama has made her employ the form of the dance drama for both *Sita's promise* and *Meera*. Both *Sita's promise* and *Meera* encompass a similar theme- the recognition of the main characters Krishna and Rama as the incarnations of Vishnu, the preserver of the universe. the discourse on human and divine dialectics is present in both. In *Meera* the realization comes to the other characters through the action of Krishna whereas in *Sita's Promise*, Rama himself becomes conscious of his divine mission only later through Vishnu whose essence, he bears.

Meera: A Dance Drama is a mythical play revealing to the western world certain culturally significant details about Krishna's life and the music and dance traditions of India. Acknowledging this fact Uma Parameswaran herself says,

Meera is a script that evolved around of the artistic resources, and set out to celebrate Indian art traditions and at the same time to educate the outsider about our culture... it has a very simple story line that takes us through Meera's life with all its familiar episodes. It gives us the pleasure of the familiar, while telling outsiders basic details about Krishna's life and our dance and music traditions. (*Sons Must Die and Other Plays*, 9)

Meera takes us through various incidents in Krishna's life- his birth in a prison cell, his migration to Gokula, in Yashoda's home, his childhood, his adolescence and finally his advent as re-incarnation of Vishnu. The play ends in jubilation with the rapturous dance of the Gopi's with Krishna and Meera's realization of the truth that her love for Krishna is that of the human longing for union with the divine, resulting into her transformation into Radha.

At the outset of the play, Meera is seen kneeling before the black marble statue of Krishna, the flute player. She washes his feet, puts *tilak* on his forehead, decks him with garlands, makes her offering of fruits, flowers and milk, and lastly picks up her *tempura* and a pair of *cymbals* in her hands and starts singing to the accompaniment of these musical instruments. Meera, the wife of Rajput prince Bhoj, who is the heir to the throne of Chittore, is devoted to the service of lord Krishna. The playwright successfully projects the mythical personality of Krishna through Meera's utterances.

Her husband Prince Bhoj is no more. His brother becomes king and spends his days and nights in the company of courtesans and sycophants. He hates Meera to the extent of offering her a cup of poison. However, she expresses her thankfulness in the following manner:

But I remember greatfully that because of this man who now sits on the throne of Chittore, Krishna came into my very being and absorbed the cup of poison meant for me.

(*Meera*, 39)

By referring to the myth of *Putana*, the vampire-nurse, and *Kalinaga* from the *Srimad Bhagavada* Uma Parameswaran confirms Meera's faith in Krishna on one hand and Krishna's godly powers on the other. To Meera the suffering caused by the poison is nothing in comparison to the bliss she enjoys dancing with Krishna and singing with him.

Meera is so emotionally attached to Krishna that while thinking of his birth, she takes herself for Devaki who brought forth the Child Divine. The Child Divine is born but the mother is worried that any moment the sword of her brother *Kamsa* will attack the child. A voice from above solves her problem as under:

Vasudeva, rise and take this child across the river to the hut of Nandha, cowherd chief of Gokula, and bring away the girl child that has been born to Yashoda this night. (*Meera*, 41)

Through the myth of Krishna's birth Uma Parameswaran reveals to the western milieu the spiritual grandeur and rich culture of India. It is also suggested that *Kamsa*-like evil forces cannot do any harm to the infant representing virtue. In scene III, Meera becomes Yashoda and sees Krishna's boyish pranks, playing hide and seek, teasing the gopis, stealing butter and mischievously protesting like ordinary children. By referring to such miraculous episodes, Uma Parameswaran repeatedly emphasizes the mythical character of this savior of mankind and killer of *Kamsa*.

Scene IV projects Krishna as the total incarnation of Vishnu, Preserver of the Universe. He comes on Earth to re establish justice and protect the virtuous. Meera very significantly refers to his teachings in the *Gita*. Mythical Krishna becomes God when he says,

Whenever there is decay of righteousness, O Arjuna, and there is exaltation of unrighteousness, then I myself come forth. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the evil doers, for the sake of establishing justice, I am born from age to age. (*Meera*, 43)

In scene V, Meera becomes Radha for whom each moment of waiting is an aeon of aching joy. She enjoys dance with Krishna to her extreme satisfaction. For her it is an attempt to the finite to reach the infinite, that is, the aspiration of the *Atman*, the soul within, to merge with the *Paramatman*, the soul above.

This play narrated by Meera also has some covert references to the immigrant situation. In the first scene, Meera is seen worshiping Krishna in the garden, where she has moved to. She says,

“My kinsmen feel that I have betrayed family honour by leaving the palace for this garden” (*Meera*, 38)

This could be a subtle reference to the migrants who leave their land in search of better opportunities. Though Meera is content with her life in the garden, she cannot help reminiscing her past life like the immigrants. The arrival of Krishna into her life could be the process of assimilation that every immigrant is waiting for. Meera recalls her suffering at the hands of the new king who treacherously made her drink poison, and Krishna’s timely rescue, which was rewarded enough for all the troubles she had gone through. The migrants too, similarly go

through an excruciating process of growth in the new land, from acculturation to alienation before they get assimilated in the alien culture. Meera's words:

Great was the suffering till Krishna came but greater far the fulfillment

(Meera, 39)

Validate this point. Similarly Devaki's talk about the painful process of birth and the ecstasy that follows it echoes the process of birth of a new multicultural society which though fraught with pain and suffering, can yield joy in the end. The author inserts the idea of racial equality when Vasudeva persuades Devaki to accept the child, not her own. He tells her,

A child is always heaven sent, no matter who begets it and who

bears it. (Meera, 42)

This theme is centralized in the repeated birth of Meera in the form of Yeshodha and as Radha. All these births testify to the ultimate unity of all forms that constitute Vishnu. Uma parameshvaran seems to point out through this play, the oneness of the human race.

The play *Sita's Promise* presents Rama, Sita and Lakshmanan in their eleventh year of exile, travelling far and wide through the forest, helping the holy men who leave in hermitage. The characters from legends are not some remote concoctions but symbols, possessing psychological validity when seen against the contemporary background. The play has veiled reference to exile, alienation and migration. Uma Parameshvaran herself comments upon the story of the play in relation to Rama:

Its only point of coincidence with the original epic is that Rama was exiled for fourteen years. The character of Rama is interpretative, not traditional. It traces Rama's growth from a narrow free occupation with codes of king ship to awareness of what it is to be human to a point where he realizes his divine mission.

The play opens with the narrator's salutation to goddess Lakshmi , consort of Vishnu. Then he tells the audience that Rama, Prince of Ayodhya was banished for fourteen years by his father King Dasharadha. In scene two the playwright furthers the story of Rama by referring to the myths like Vishnu, Snake Adhishesha, Jadayu and Himavan. Uma Parameswaran intelligently associates the bird with Lord Vishnu and snake adhishesha with a view of acquainting the people of the west especially Canadians with Indian mythology.

The Arctic Tern that loses its way and lies injured, as it cannot adapt to the new environment is indicative of the acculturation and alienation that the immigrant first goes through. The pain of exile of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana from their home and their nostalgia are also typical of the immigrant mentality.

Uma Parameswaran's fondness of her homeland and the sense of pride in her culture are evident when Sita talks of the beauty of her homeland to the native children who symbolizes the Canadian's,

“I wish I could give you the beauty of our forests, our rivers, our elephants and our many colored birds and our warm sunshine” (Sita's promise'62)

The play end with the note of hope with Sita promising the Intuit children that she will be back again to the lovely land of lakes and blue skies and snow through the people. That is the reason for the migration of many Indians to modern Canada now. The author presents Rama in all his

weakness and strength, showing his transformation from a person with narrow obligations of duty to one of universal love and spirituality. In the end, the author seems to highlight the essential humanity of mankind and the importance of all encompassing love, irrespective of colour, race and nation.

Myths and legends thus make their pathways from the spiritual to the secular world of theatre. By incorporating these myths and legends, Uma Parameswaran developed a new aesthetics in theatre. As a structural device, myths bring coherence in her theme, plots and characterization.

On the psychological level, she explores the variations of the human psyche. Moreover, myth becomes a means of linking the particular with the universal. Drawing strongly on the age old tradition of storytelling as a narrative strategy, Uma Parameswaran makes her tales a compound world picture of culture, customs, ideas, ethics and values of the community. One of the strengths is her uncanny ability to blend modern experience with traditional myths and stories. Diane McGifford rightly sums up her works,

“Uma Parameswaran insists on her cultural heritage, not because she disavows the one she found here, but because it is hers: because she trusts that a union of eastern and western traditions will reconcile her people to Canadian society, and enhance its culture,”
(307)

She writes with ease about issues pertaining to both the societies and regards both the cultures as her own. Many of her works are very much Indian in their themes and motifs, even as they reflect contemporary Canadian life. Mud bound in memory she brings the Ganga from her homeland and merges it with the Assiniboine, forging a link. Uma Parameswaran affirms

through her works that the figurative maple tree of Canada can, and must bear different kinds of fruits, befitting its status as a multicultural mosaic.

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