

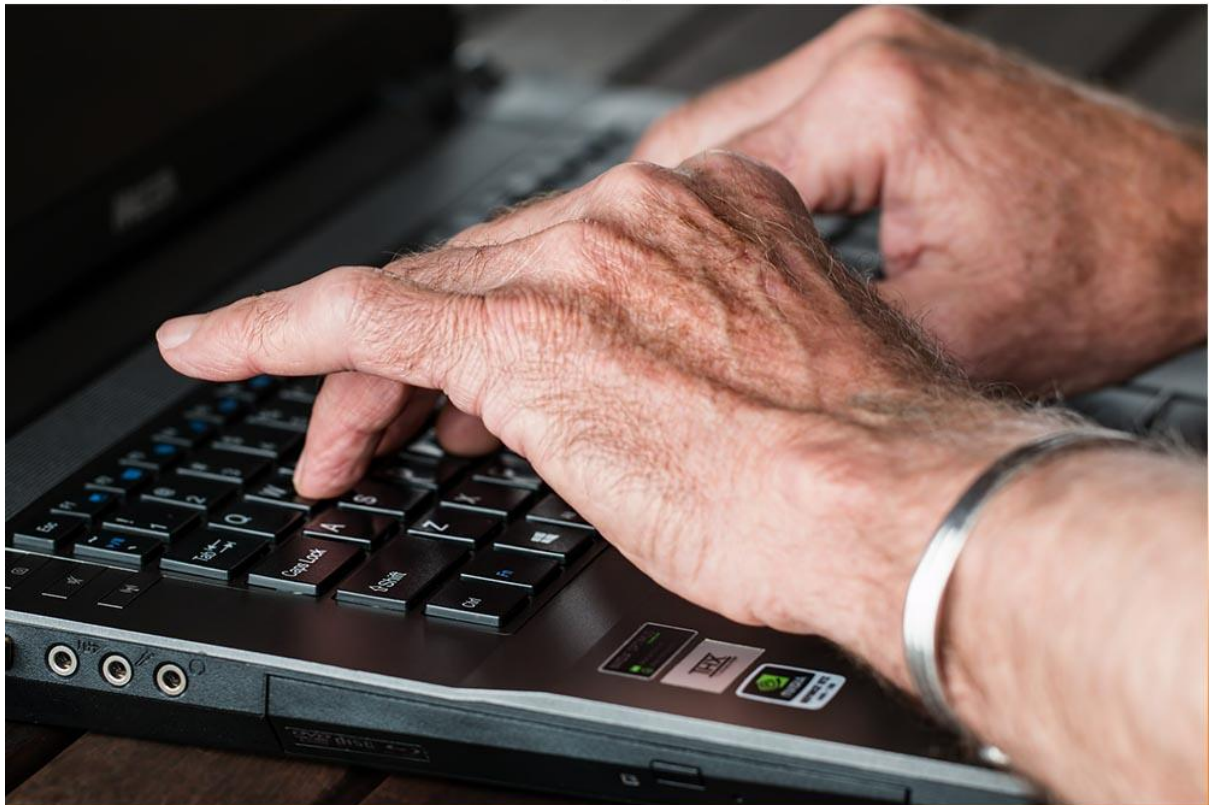
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### Proliferation of Mythological Novels in Contemporary Indian English Fiction

#### Abstract

Myths have been used in Indian literatures since time immemorial as a significant tool to expose some crucial debates like casteism, poverty, men-women relationship, social injustice, politics, various movements. In the present era of globalisation, there is an emergence of a new tradition of re-writing, re-telling, re-imagining the myths with contemporary perspective. Writers like Amish Tripathi, Ashok K Banker, Devdutt Pattanaik, Nilanjan P Chaudhari, Anand Neelakantan, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anuja Chandramouli, Shinde Sweety, Vamsee Juluri, Rashmi Chendavankar, Gautam Chikermane, Madhvi Mahadevan, Indirabai M Rao, Aditya Iyengar, Vikas Singh, Manoshi Rawal, Vineet Agarwal, Kavita Kane, Shatrujeet Nath, Saiswaroopaa Iyer, Krishna Udayasankar, and many others turn towards myth. They use myth in a prominent way. In their works, myths operate in contemporary Indian context to evolve its new discourse in Indian fiction in English.

The present paper tries to read the phenomenon of proliferation of Mythological novels in the age of globalisation and the emergence of new English speaking elite class. Globalisation has heralded the emergence of new English speaking elite class in India. This class regularly consumes western fantasy thrillers and best sellers to which these mythological novels prove to be Indian counterparts. Apart from this, there is a certain kind of cultural identity crisis.

Indian myths can be the space – an artistic zone, where the idea of the nation and identity can be re-negotiated by this elite class. The English speaking community endeavours to create a niche in the global sphere by using the myths as one of the strong bases of their identity.

Key words: Contemporary, Indian fiction, Myth, globalisation, English speaking Elite class.

Literature has always shown profound interest and fascination for mythology. Indian literatures are no exception. Indian mythology has provided an extensive range of subjects for the creative writers from time immemorial and Myth has a prominent role to play in the life of India. The Vedas, the Upanishadas, the Epics, the Puranas and classical literatures have provided sources for the plots, themes and characterisation. Irrespective of being placed in erstwhile era or belonging to the contemporary age, myths have rested their permanent influence on Indian literature as a whole. The scholars and writers who frequently returned to the past, to its myths, stories, and philosophies were trying to find the new edifice on the sound social and cultural basis. Renowned authors like R K Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao Shashi Deshpande, Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and many others have used myth as a significant tool to expose some social and political debates of contemporary India. Simultaneously, many writers have endeavoured to accommodate long lost mythological stories of gods and demons in their exceedingly creative activities.

Indian fiction in English, in one or the other way tries to textualise living myths by participating in literary discourse. It allows exploring of its interiors and deep rooted existence to comprehend the linkages among myths, archetypes and the development of new sensibilities in contemporary Indian society. There seems a second wave of great Indian mythology in current century. In the present era of globalisation, there is an emergence of a new tradition of re-writing, re-creating, re-telling, remembering, re-introducing, re-imagining the myths with a contemporary perspective. Ancient myths are deployed in today's context to provide the matrix

of history, philosophy and psychology. To search for the new venues of creative expressions, authors like Amish Tripathi, Ashok K Banker, Devdutt Pattanaik, Nilanjan P Chaudhari, Anand Neelakantan, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anuja Chandramouli, Shinde Sweety, Vamsee Juluri, Rashmi Chendavankar, Gautam Chikermane, Madhvi Mahadevan, Pavan K Varma, Indirabai M Rao, Aditya Iyengar, Vikas Singh, Manoshi Rawal, Vineet Agarwal, Kavita Kane, Shatrujeet Nath, Saiswaroopaa Iyer, Krishna Udayasankar, and many others turn towards myth. They use myth in a prominent way. Their major interests are Puranas, Epics and Upanishadas.

The whole tradition of rewriting Indian myth in English began with the publication of Ashok Banker's first book of *Ramayana Series – The Prince of Ayodhya* (2003). Before Banker based his fiction entirely on myth, myth was merely used as referential by Indian writers in English. It was Ashok Banker who used myth in a prominent way. The book is followed by *Siege of Mithila* (2003), *Demons of Chitrakut* (2004), *Armies of Hanuman* (2005), *Bridge of Rama* (2005), *King of Ayodhya* (2006), *Vengeance of Ravana* (2011), and *Sons of Sita* (2012). Apart from that he has rewritten *The Mahabharata* and Krishna Series - titled, *Krishna Coriolis. Epic Love Stories* about characters like Santanu and Ganga, Devayani, Sharmishtha and Yayati, Bhishma and Amba, Shakuntala and Dushyanta, Satyawati and Santanu, etc.

Devdutt Pattanaik has rewritten epics: *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010), *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* (2013) *Shyam: An Illustrated Retelling of the Bhagavata* (2018) and *Hanuman's Ramayan* (2010). Apart from that he has retold certain incidents from epic in the form of short stories and novels: *Shikhandi: And Other Tales They Don't Tell You* (2014) and *The Pregnant King*.

Amish Tripathi's Shiva trilogy is based on *Shiva Purana*. The novel recreates the history of a man named Shiva who was deified many years later. His another trilogy is Ram Chandra series contains titles - *Scion of Ikshwaku* (2015), *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (2017) and *Raavana: Orphan of Aryavrata* (2018).

Anuja Chandramouli has glorified and re-interpreted the characters from *The Mahabharata* and Other Sanskrit classical texts. *Arjuna: Saga of a Pandava Warrior-Prince* (2013), *Kamadeva: The God of Desire* (2014), *Shakti: The Divine Feminine* (2015), *Yama's Lieutenant* (2016), *Yama's Lieutenant and the Stone Witch* (2017), *Kartikeya: The Destroyer's Son* (2017), *Ganga: The Constant Goddess* (2018) are her major contributions.

Shinde Sweety, *Arjun: Without a Doubt* (2015) tries to present Arjun not only as an archer or warrior, but the major focus is on giving his conscience a voice and his transformation from eunuch to man and man to eunuch. The novel tries to restore the glory of misunderstood hero of Mahabharata.

Anand Neelakantan has tried to give voice to the characters like Ravana and Duryodhana. *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* narrates the story of Ravana from a different perspective. *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* (2013) and *Rise of Kali: Duryodhana's Mahabharata* (2015) is an Epic of the Kaurava Clan. Apart from that, *Shanta: The Story of Rama's Sister* (2017), *Bhoomija: Sita* (2017), *Vanara- The legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara* (2018), *Ravana's Sister (Meenakshi)* (2018) are his major works that focus on less glorified characters from epics.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusion* is the novel narrated from Draupadi's point of view. Nilanjan P. Choudhury's *Bali and the Ocean of Milk* retells the tale from The *Bhagavata Purana*.

*Saraswati's Intelligence* (2017) first book of Hanuman Trilogy by Vamsee Juluri reimagines the story of Hanuman and his people of Kishkindha from new perspective.

*Tunnel of Varanavat: Mahabharata Reimagined* (2016) by Gautam Chikermane reimagines the tale of Badri who saved Pandavas from the Lakshagrah fire from *The Mahabharata*.

Madhvi S Mahadevan has reimagined *The Mahabahrata* from Kunti's perspective in *The Kaunteyas* (2016).

Indirabai M Rao in her *Suryaputra Kaunteya - The Story of Karna The Great* (2002) retells the story of Karna.

Aditya Iyengar's *Kurukshetra Trilogy: The Thirteenth Day, A Broken Sun, and Palace of Assassins* (2015-18) retells the story of Kurukshetra war.

Kavita Kane has contributed by voicing certain women characters who are rather neglected or misunderstood. *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen, Sita's Sister, Lanka's Princess, Menaka's Choice, The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* narrates the stories of Uruvi, Urmeela, Surpanakha, Menka and Satyavati respectively from the perspectives of women.

The list goes on: Shatrujeet Nath, Saiswaroopaa Iyer, Krishna Udayasankar, Vikas Singh, Manoshi Rawal, Vineet Agarwal and many others.

The major observation here is that these mythological fictions clearly fall under two categories: one that are faithful to the original plot from Sanskrit classical texts and two which are subversive. Authors like Ashok Banker, Pattanaik, Amish Tripathi, Shinde Sweety treat the plot with slight twists and turns and add western thrillers like special effects, they remain faithful to the original plot or they treat them as same characters different Plots but non-subversive. Writers like Chitra Banerjee, Anand Neelakantan, Kavita Kane are subverting myths of certain repressed or oppressed characters. They retell the myths from the perspectives of 'villains' too.

This confluence of mythology and fiction has become a trendsetter in Indian Writing in English. The paper explores the phenomenon of 'proliferation of mythological novels' by focusing on the social and cultural context in the present era of globalisation. The paper considers the proliferation of mythological novels in contemporary times as a direct result of the impact of globalization.

It is crucial to understand globalisation for better cognition of the argument. Globalisation is a broad term that amalgamates/ encompasses catastrophic worldwide changes in economy, technology, society, culture and politics through the matrix of exchange. It can be defined as dissemination of International influence on regional or local phenomena. It transforms the local and regional into global one. It reduces or almost removes national boundaries and creates opportunities for smooth environment for business, service and workforce.

J A Scholte in his book, *Globalisation: A Critical Introduction* (2000) introduces classification of globalization. Globalization in terms of Internationalization is largely based on exchange of trades, capital investment, information, people and ideas among different countries for the economic benefit. Liberalization refers to ease the restrictions and barriers between countries in order to facilitate international economic integration. Deterritorialization is a social process where the barriers of boundaries and borders on social and cultural factors withdrawn to certain level. Westernization refers to the ideas of the west are borrowed, imposed or accepted with or without force. Universalization suggests synthesis of all cultures on the planet by becoming really global (15-16).

Anthony Giddens defines globalisation in *The Consequences of Modernity* (1991), “Globalization is the intensification of worldwide social relations which links distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (64). Distinct localities are interconnected through spatial and linguistic aspects. Spatial includes transport systems like railroad and cars, telephone and other media technologies. Linguistic linkages can be understood by means of communication to these localities. All together affect and intensify the happenings.

The structuration of globality among various parts of the world, depends upon the ratio of interchangeability of exchange, understanding and transactions. One of the characteristic

features of globalization is that it domesticizes the international as it internationalizes the domestic. It promotes for the localized meaning by focusing on the linguistic and semiotic features which makes them global. It implies the unification of the world into single entity by removing or erasing the identity of individual consciousness.

Globalisation put forward the question of national boundaries. It becomes more complicated when it is considered in terms of country like India. Whether it diminished nationalism or intensified it, must be answered. Superficially, globalisation proved to soften the idea of nationalism. As John Kusumi argues, “Globalization is the anti-thesis of nationalism as it suggests that there are no boundaries (and) just one globe” (Godfrey, 2008). Cultural plurality is transformed into world culture. Globalisation has, in fact, reduced the significance of national barriers. The distinctive local cultures are under erosion and there is an identity crisis. The age old concept of nation state comes under threat. It has been rightly termed as universalisation, liberalisation, internationalisation.

But at the deeper level, it seems to be the prominent force for the resurgence of nationalism globally. There has been a resurgence of nationalism, traditionalism, and religious fundamentalism alongside trends toward growing globalization from the late 1980s. “With the explosion of regional, cultural and religious differences, culture has become a new source of conflict and an important dimension of struggle between the global and the local.” (Godfrey, 2008)

“National movements are motivated by a desire to assure the existence and flourishing of a particular community to preserve its culture, tradition, language” (Natalie, 170). In the country like India, the issue of nationalism, instead of being obsolete, remained strong and meaningful. Being an external force that results in diminishing nationalism, globalisation provoked nationalism in stronger way. According to Giddens, “The revival of local nationalism

and an accentuating of local identities are directly bound up with globalizing influences to which they stand in opposition” (*Beyond Left and Right*, 05).

National boundaries have become, more or less, fluid; enabling easy economic enterprise and socio-cultural changes across the borders. Melting away of geographical boundaries, initiation of the arrival of multinationals and the intervention caused by globalization threaten local cultures into extinction and greatly affected almost all national and cultural artifacts like national literature, film industry, television serials, local cafe culture.

Because of liberalization and privatization, the grip of the state was loosened on media, TV, industries, education, health and so on. The freedom of voice and expression was extended in all realms which resulted in the rise of the new reader in contemporary times. The delimitation of certain ideologies renders a new era of the mixture and free acceptance of the West. Initially the west has been imitated but lately the elite class has invented their own space and language to express their sensibilities.

Globalisation has an impact on Indian localities and are shaped and reshaped by it. The Indian counterpart also has reactions in this respect. The entrances of the global market in India threatens the local culture and folk traditions. With the advent of globalisation, the national boundaries have faded away and have created a certain kind of cultural identity crisis, which Meenakshi Mukherjee terms as ‘anxiety of Indianness’. The contestation and negotiations in the view of new ideologies of contemporary India can be a turning point in the way of looking Indian identity with different perspective at global platform. Globalization has created a void where India as a nation must be located.

Apart from that, the phenomena of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation have led to the emergence of a new class of English speaking elites (Sajith Pai) what – in his *Becoming Indian* (2010) and *The Great Indian Middle Class* (1998) – Pavan Varma called new Indian middle class (Varma, 178). This generation – Urban Indian English speaking youth is

also a major consumer of western best sellers of fantasy and thriller viz. J. K. Rowling, Stephanie Meyer, and Dan Brown to which they need an Indian counterpart. They approach the text with some prior cultural knowledge and suggests the codes developed in reading globalised fantasy novels like *Twilight Saga* (2005-2008), *Harry Potter Series* (1997-2007), *The Lords of the Ring* (1968), *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and so on. This global popular fiction is rich in terms of folklore, fantasy and mythology. Besides, this new audience also regularly consumes mythological and fantasy programmes on television that were privatized and digitized after the 1990s. Poetics and ideology of this readership that influences the mythological novels is thus influenced by globalization. They form an important aspect of the cultural knowledge with which reader brought to their interpretations of mythological novels.

The identity crisis experienced by specific educated, urbanised Indian elite class emanating from globalisation and expressed through liberalisation is addressed by these mythological novels. Contemporary mythological novels are Indian analogue of the western best sellers for English speaking cosmopolitan Indian. They present gods as more human than divine. As the god-ness of gods is being questioned, contemporary readers find their voice in the myth narratives and this identification makes them interesting reads.

Partha Chatterjee questions and contests the idea of the nation in the essay “Whose Imagined Communities?”— a critique of *Imagined Communities* (Benedict Anderson). According to his critique, the nation is created by the material domain (imitation of the west) and spiritual domain (nation culture) in the post-colonial period. The material domain is mostly based on the western modular in the fields like economy, statecraft, science and technology. The material is the domain of the outside. The latter – the spiritual is an inner domain. It consists of nation language created by native elites. They try to make native language fit into ‘modern’ culture keeping the State (material domain) out of its periphery; hence, create their own artistic space (218-219). The English speaking community endeavours to create a niche at the global

sphere by using the myths as one of the strong bases of their identity. Contemporary mythological novels are Indian counterpart to those western fantasy thrillers and provide space to negotiate their identity at global spheres. Indian myths can be the space – an artistic zone, where the idea of the nation and identity can be re-negotiated by this elite class.

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