

MYTHOLOGY IN LITERATURE: READING BETWEEN THE LINES

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Abstract: Mythology is a part of every culture. The history of a nation and its tradition is often related to the mythological beliefs of the place. These beliefs and practices find its way to the literature of the land too. In India, we have a very strong hold on our mythology and this is proved by the rich treasure of writings on different mythological aspects that are available today. This trend is seen in other parts of the world too. Not only the pure mythological tales, but subversive tales and re-readings have become very famous in the post-colonial world. Now people try to find the unspoken words in the stories of our ancestors, look at the unseen places, find the unspoken truths. Various new literary pieces are produced keeping in mind the mythological characters. Something of the similar kind is what I intend to do through this paper. Examining different literary pieces, we will try to 'read between the lines' and look at the meanings of the tales from a different angle. This paper will try to study how the views and ideas of the people have changed regarding these tales and how it have started a different discourse altogether, one that tries to uncover how the mythological characters and tales are valid even in this modern world.

Keywords: Mythology, Culture, Modern world, Literature, Re-reading, Post-Colonial.

Introduction: Mythology can said to be one of the mirrors that reflect the culture and traditions of a society. Every society, state or country have their own mythological beliefs and practices and they differ from region to region. Mythology is a very close associate of religion, but there are many mythological tales that have transcended the border of religion and are accepted equally by people, irrespective of the religion they follow. The mythological tales also tells us about heritage and the lifestyle as well as the beliefs and practices of the people during the time when the tales underwent formation.

In this paper we will try to explore how the views of people towards mythology have changed; how now people try to look at the other side of the coin and try to look for the unwritten letters, the unspoken words. As time progressed, many have questioned the epics, the mythological tales. Many tried to explore the characters from a different angle and to come up with a story from different perspectives. Re-reading of stories and subversive tales has become a trend in the post-colonial era and these have happened in the sphere of mythology too. This diversion from the fixed notions have found their way into literature all around the world and something of a similar kind is what I sought to do in this paper. In this paper we will 'read between the lines' of some literary pieces that gives us a different story than the original one and try to understand the views and ideas expressed from the point-of-view of a modern reader.

Not only the tales are being re-read, but in the post-colonial period even the identity and names of mythological characters are used to give us an indication of the characteristics or nature of a character the writer is writing about. One example of this can be found in the short story *Draupadi* written by Mahasweta Devi. In this story the author uses the nomenclature of the famous mythological character,

Draupadi, to show us how the condition of women has changed through times. This story has a feminist approach too which gives us an idea of how our identities and culture were destroyed during the colonial regime. The protagonist of the story, Draupadi, is called Dopdi by the English soldiers. Even the Indian people, who are aware of the original name calls her Dopdi. This can be seen as an attack on the identity of a person.

Comparing Dopdi of this story to Draupadi of Mahabharata, Devi tells us about the plight of women in the modern age. In Mahabharata when the Kauravas tried to molest Draupadi in the open court it was Lord Krishna who saved her. But in this age nor is there any Draupadi and neither is there any Krishna to save the integrity of women. Dopdi of this story is raped multiple times by the soldiers only so that she would talk and give information about the rebels she was associated with. No one comes to help her when her clothes are torn away from her body. This is the plight of many women in today's world. They become the prey of the greed, oppression and violence of the patriarchal society.

This story also teaches us that power lies within oneself. We don't need the help of others if we choose to root for our beliefs and ideas. The story also gives us an image of another Goddess of Hindu mythology, Kali in the end. Devi writes -

"Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing"

[Devi, Mahasweta ; *Draupadi*]

Draupadi coming towards the violator, all naked and the sun shining upon her and blood flowing from her lips presents in front of us the image of Goddess Kali. From the helpless person she is now someone who masters courage to stand in front of her enemies and

face them. As soon as she is capable of doing this she gains back her identity. She is now called Draupadi instead of Dopdi, her distorted name.

W.B. Yeats is one of the most famous poets of the 19th and 20th century. He was greatly inspired by Hindu mythology and also the believed of Christianity. This is reflected by his works too. In his poem "The Second Coming" he mixes both of them together and gives us an image of an entity which will be responsible for changing the world. He writes –

"...A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun, ..."

[W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*, 1929]

The idea of the end of an age and coming of another is present in almost all mythological believes of the world. The same is spoken about in this poem. The poet says that the 'Spiritus Mundi' will come to replace Jesus in Bethlehem. But the image of the 'Spiritus Mundi' is somewhat similar to that of Narasimha of Hindu mythology, the difference being that Narasimha had the head of a lion and the body of man. This difference may be because the tale of Narasimha is of the past. He came to establish faith in God and goodness while the Spiritus Mundi will come, as believed by Yeats to destroy the whole old order and civilisation and establish a new one in its place. The situation and condition of the world is completely different from the past.

In a poem named " Ekalavya of the Long Tarai" the poet Bijoy Kumar Debbarma uses the mythological characters of Ekalavya, Arjun, Yudhisthir, Duryodhan and Dronacharya to speak about class divisions and the domination of the poor by the rich. The poet writes –

"The Arjunas will never let you climb the chhatim tree,

Lest you touch the sky ...

...However complete you become,

The Arjunas will always cut off your thumb

Dronacharyas being behind them ...

...To defeat you the Yudhisthiras and the

Duryodhanas forget their enmity

and spread for you a death – trap."

[Debbarma, Bijoy Kumar ; *Ekalavya of the Long Tarai*]

According to our mythology Ekalavya didn't belong to any royalty and hence he was refused education by Dronacharya. When he acquired his talents all by himself with hard work, Dronacharya being his role model, he asked to cut off his right thumb as 'guru dakshina' by Dronacharya so that he doesn't surpass his favourite pupil Arjun in capabilities. This act was completely unjustified. The poet uses this incident to talk about how the people of the lower class are always suppressed by the people of the upper class and they are seldom given a chance to explore their talents and climb up higher in the society. Even if

they are somehow able to achieve something in their lives they are pointed out. The worst of enemies of the rich and upper classes unites to destroy them, their common enemy, so that they are not able to question or challenge their position and say in the society and its norms.

Talking about re-reading of myths and mythology we can cite the example of Shashi Deshpand's short story *The Last Enemy*. This story is written from the point-of-view of Duryodhana, the main antagonist of Mahabharata. The post colonial notions of stream of consciousness and psychoanalysis play a very significant role in this story. The story gives us an insight to the character of Duryodhana and tells us what could have made him the person he became. The story tells us that no one is evil by birth; it is the circumstances they live in and the situations that they face that make them so. Duryodhana may be the antagonist of Mahabharata, but he was also wronged throughout his life. Everyone wants their own period of fame and glory but Duryodhana was always forced to live in the shadow of the Pandavas. Even Dronacharya gave priority to the Pandavas whereas he should have remained impartial as a teacher. Many other similar conditions made him the evil that we always associate with his name.

Toru Dutt, one of the first feminist writers of India, a Bengali girl from the 19th century also speaks about some prominent mythological figures in one of the letters to Mary Martin. She wrote –

"... how grand, how sublime, how pathetic our legends are. The wifely devotion that an Indian wife pays to her husband, her submission to him even when he is capricious or exacting, her worship of him as the 'god of her life' ... The legend of Nala and Damayanti, that of Savitri, who followed 'Yama' even to the lower regions, ...the legend of Sacountasla and Douchmanta; that of Queen Gandhari, who, because her husband was blind, put a band on her own eyes, ... And last, but not the least, the grand legend of Ram and Sita."

[Dutt, Toru; in a letter to Mary Martin on April 24, 1876]

Through the mentioned excerpt we get an idea of the feminist views of Dutt. She did not favour the idea of how the husband is always treated as God by the Indian wives. However wrong a husband may be, his actions are never questions. It is the wife who is expected to make all the sacrifices, just like Queen Gandhari, who gave up her ability to see so that she doesn't become superior to her husband in any right.

In a novel by Christopher C. Doyle called *The Mahabharata Secret*, we are given the tale of Mahabharata from a modern, scientific perspective. It joins the story of Mahabharata to emperor Ashoka. Myth joins its hands with reality. The arrows used in the epic possessing super powers are hinted to be

rockets, while the flying chariots are said to be the earliest specimens of the present day flying machines like the aeroplane or helicopter. The presence of aliens is also hinted to in this novel. This novel shows us how the modern writers have approached and tried to understand the mythological takes from a different angle and presented them through literature with a new twist.

Rainer Maria Rilke was a famous poet who was very much influenced by the renaissance art and sculpture. In his poem "*Archaic Torso of Apollo*" he uses the image of the Greek God Apollo to make us understand about the efficiency and importance of art. In this poem he describes a headless statue but the brilliance of the statue doesn't decrease because of its headless condition. The beauty of the sculpture is eternal and it seems as if it is glowing. Apollo is said to be the Sun God and hence the notion of light being associated with him is not extraordinary. But the glow mentioned in the poem is a reference to the skill of the sculptor. The talent of the sculptor is such that the statue doesn't fail to catch and hold the attention of the viewer despite of its headless condition. The power and dominance that Apollo holds as a god is now reflected through his statue.

"We cannot know its legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned low,
gleams in all its power."

[Rilke, Rainer Marie ; *Archaic Torso of Apollo*,]

Amitav Ghosh, one of the most significant Indian writers writing in English today has also made profound use of mythology in his novels. In his novel "*The Hungry Tide*" he describes the story of the origination of the river Ganga in very fine words. He also uses the mythological characters of Shah Jongoli

and Bon Bibi, two deities revered in the Sundarban jungles to give us the idea of triumph of good over evil in every situation. He also expresses the idea of the importance of the forests and how the destruction of forest is hazardous to the lives of humans through them. These characters are shown as the protector of the forests. Anyone who loves and protects the forest is protected by them while the people who try to destroy the forests become their prey. This gives us the notion of how it is the responsibility of the people to protect the forest. Ghosh, in a way, brings forth the notion of eco-criticism through the use of the mythological characters of Shah Jongoli and Bon Biwi.

Mythological tales are a part of the lives of almost every individual. Many of us grow up listening to them. They teach us the meaning of life, give us morals regarding good and evil, and show us how our actions and decisions can affect our lives in the long run. But as time progressed the views of people have changes towards them. People now have become more adventurous and less trusting which has resulted in the attitude of questioning. Now people don't accept whatever is told to them very easily. These have caused the availability of the same story from different angles. People try to find the answers to questions left unasked or unanswered in the myths and legends. Using the glasses of feminism, post-colonialism, modernism, post-modernism, Marxism etc., different versions of stories and poems have come out. The examples provided in this paper are only a few of them. And all these only opens new doors of exploration and expression for the people, and also makes them understand themselves, their ideas, their traditions, identity, mythology and society better.

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