

MYTH CRITICISM AND THE RETELLING OF MYTHS

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Abstract

Myths due to their antiquity fall out of prevalent culture and are lost links in socio-cultural pedagogies. Myth criticism has helped myths by stancing them to suit contemporary tastes. This paper shall aim to look at myth criticism and how it helps the reinventing of myths. It also looks at how myth criticism is different from archetypal criticism.

The paper negotiates itself by tracing myths as an entity very distinct from fables and legends and goes on to define myth criticism in the light of psychoanalytical theory and Marxist theory.

The paper looks at how relevant myth criticism is in the context of contemporary literary theory and whether it injects a new life into age-old myths that are falling out of favour.

Myth originates from the word muthos which translates as 'anything uttered by word of mouth. It is associated with complex history both in terms of meaning and anthropological ancestry. Homer used the word muthos in the context of narrative and conversation but never interpreted it as fiction which is the most widely accepted association. Odysseus tells fictitious stories about himself and the connotative term he employs in muthologenevein that signifies 'telling a story'. In later usage, Greek muthos came to mean a word that denotes partial truth.

The other terms associated with myth are muein i.e. to initiate into secrets hence mystic or mysterious, muthi kos meaning mythical. Later in Latin, the term fabula came into practise that means narrative construction.

The ancient Greek philosophers understood mythos to be a distinct entity from logos The term logos is to be understood as the faculty of reason and judgement as opposed to mythos that is fired by imagination. Mythos was derived thus from an intuitive faculty as opposed to logos that depended entirely upon reasonable deliberations. Thus, myths have always been associated with oracles and dark arts while logos paved the way for rational disciplines such as mathematics and science. Despite their oppositional nature both mythos and logos have complemented each other. Logos explained phenomena such as the rising of the sun and the moon, the process of birth and death .But some questions remained, as to why the sun rises and why are people born? Where do they come from when they are born and where do they go after they die? Mythos is thus a philosophical quest. It does not always give answers but it does extend a sense of purpose, meaning and validation to existence.

Devdutt Patnaik in his book titled Myth=Mithya tells us how ancient Hindu seers distinguished between myth and truth. Myth to them was mithya as opposed to satya or truth. If mithya could at all be redeemed to the status of truth, then it was possible only by circumscribing it into a frame of reference. Mithya thus is a limited sort of a reality or a distorted view of reality.

In Devdutt Patnaik's words, "Myth is essentially a cultural construct, a common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together. The understanding may be religious or secular. Ideas such as rebirth, heaven and hell, angels and demons, fate and freewill, sin, Satan, and salvation are religious myths. Ideas such as sovereignty, nation, state, human right, women's rights, animal rights and gay rights are secular myths. Religious or secular, all myths make sense to one group of people. Not to everyone. They cannot be rationalized beyond a point. In the final analysis, you either accept them or don't. (Patnaik , xvi)

Russian formalists Vladimir Propp and Viktor Shklovsky used the terms *fabula* and *syuzhet* in the context of narratology and narrative construction. *Syuzhet* is the employing of narrative and *fabula* goes on to determine the chronological order of the retold events.

Contemporary interpretation tends to look at myth as fiction, but a fiction that goes on to convey psychological truth. A myth in popular understanding is looked at as a story which is not true, which generally involves supernatural beings or supra-human beings that give it the fictitious proportions or mythicity.

One may go on to ask the question what purpose a myth fulfils? It can be interpreted as a process of creation and as a valuable cultural link. It goes on to explain how something came into existence

In the classical era, mythology was a contemporary thought. By contrast, in the modern times, writers have been aspiring to create a mythology and impregnate it with their beliefs and ideas. A lot of literary writing leans upon Chinese, Persian, Indian, Greek, Roman and Egyptian myths. In fact, Latin American myths and most civilizations are an integral part of contemporary dialogue in retracing human origin of thought. Religion in a big way aids the cause of myth because unlike stories, religious beliefs rarely fall out of practise and are perpetual in nature.

Myth is one unit of the larger lattice called mythology, which have descended through an oral tradition which is a legacy of a particular cultural group that undergoes change through hybridity.

Myths establish social customs as rational and serve as guidelines for how people should conduct their lives. It is important at this juncture to include in this discourse the idea of 'Cultural Materialism'. The British left-wing critic Raymond Williams contributed to the emergence of the theory of cultural materialism. Since myths are embedded with a cultural code, it would be interesting to note that Raymond's coined the phrase 'structures of feeling' for myths. These structures are concerned with 'meanings and values' as they are 'lived and felt'.

These structures of feelings are opposite to structures of beliefs and dominant ideologies in society. Thus, they form a major body in literature and oppose the status quo in society. Thus cultural materialism serves as a vehicle of change. Similarly, narratives such as myths adapted to its times is a source of oppositional values. So how do myths readapt themselves?

Is there a discipline such as myth criticism? If yes, where does myth criticism begin to feature? It is like the question raised in empiricism which came first, matter or mind? Is mythology in its acceptance heavily incumbent upon myth criticism? What is myth criticism?

Contemporary literary analysis looks at myth as a very prominent term. Myth critics such as Robert Graves, Francis Fergusson, Richard Chase, Philip Wheelwright, Leslie Fielder and Northrop Frye look at plot archetypes

and mythic formulas which are the fulcrum of such a fictitious narrative. One of the most seminal works on myth criticism and archetypal imagery can be attributed to Northrop Frye, a Canadian literary critic.

According to Frye's theory, narrative genres can be classified into four types:

1. Comedy
2. Romance
3. Tragedy
4. Irony

These narrative forms can be further associated with the seasonal cycle of spring, summer, autumn and winter which have been incorporated heavily by all the romantic poets in their fancy wreathes and mythopoeia. Seasonal cycles have had very many religious associations in ancient civilizations. Frye in his theory of myths asserted that archetypal patterns are most discernible in myths. The very nature of myth is abstract and imaginative and therefore it yields most readily, archetypal patterns. In fact, acc

ording to Frye, a myth is an organisation of archetypal symbols. The essential coordinates of a myth would thus be an absolute, metaphorical identity that conducts all its action either into an apocalyptic world or into a demonic one.

Frye's theory of 'Archetypal Imagery' rests upon two axes of reference. On one axis, he locates the 'types of imagery' and on the other 'levels of reality'. Initially, he identified three types of imagery, namely, i) apocalyptic ii) demonic iii) analogic. Later, in practice, he expanded the third category of analogic in three more types of imagery those of i) romantic ii) high mimetic iii) realistic

On the other axis, he looks at categories or 'levels of reality'. These he divides it into seven categories. Thus reality that is conceived, occurs in the following worlds:

- i) Divine world
- ii) Human world
- iii) Animal world
- iv) Vegetable world
- v) Mineral world
- vi) Fire world
- vii) Watery world

The coordinates plotted across these two axes form a matrix upon which one can locate archetypal imagery.

Sir James George Frazer, a Scottish anthropologist in his comparative study of mythology and religion gave us the seminal text of *The Golden Bough*. The book's influence extended beyond the discipline of anthropology, and cultural studies and presents itself as a quintessential treatise in myth criticism. In *The Golden Bough* Frazer compared the shared practices and mythological beliefs of ancient and modern religions.

Similar to Frye's theory of birth, death and rebirth and the cyclic nature of seasons, Frazer attested the fact that birth- death-rebirth is a cyclic myth in all cultural mythologies and is manifest in growing seasons and vegetation. The symbols of death and rebirth can be looked at as final harvest and spring.

Frazer cites the Greek myth of Persephone who was abducted by Hades and carried to the underworld. Persephone's mother, Demeter, the Goddess of harvest was heartbroken and struck the earth with fall and winter. She awaited her daughter's return. Before returning Persephone, Hades tricked her into eating six pomegranate seeds by Hades due to which she was forced to spend half the year in the underworld. While Persephone stayed with Demeter in the mortal realm, the earth is blessed with spring and summer. Thus natural phenomenon is enmeshed with cultural beliefs and that constitutes a major body of myths.

This paper strives to present that myth criticism anticipated literature and introduced contemporaneity as an essential feature of their hybridity. The Golden Bough inspired many later works of literature. Robert Graves in his poetry infused ideas of the dying king from the golden bough to present his ideas of a poet's lament for the muse-goddess in his book called the white goddess (1948).

Later Frazer's work went on to inform W.B. Yeats' sailing to Byzantium, H.P Lovecraft's book The Call of Cthulhu and T.S. Eliot's The Wasteland. Notable writings such as those of Sigmund Freud, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, D.H Lawrence, and Ezra Pound attributed many of the symbols they employed to The Golden Bough and endorsed its deep influence.

Carl Gustav Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist in his theory about myths and archetypes looked at their relation with the unconscious. Myths in the Jungian perspective are "culturally elaborated representations of the contexts of the deepest recess of human psyche: the world of the archetypes" (Walker, 4). Jung relates the collective unconscious to archetypal criticism. Frazer and Jung intersect in their views in the death- rebirth myth. Frazer looks at them as a representation of seasons and Jung takes it as a symbolic expression of a process that takes place not in the world but in the mind. Jung looks at it as a cyclic process, a kind of temporary death of ego and then its re-emergence or rebirth from the unconscious.

Most myths proliferate out of such a basic structure that of birth-death- rebirth.

While Frazer's work influenced many other works of literature, Jung's theory brought into context, multifocality. Frye's work in myth criticism displaced new criticism and gave way to structuralism and semiotics.

Frye's work was distinct from that of Frazer and Jung's because he neither concerned himself with anthropology nor with psychoanalysis. He was keen to look at the function and effect of archetypes.

Frye's archetypal criticism ran into troubled grounds with the emergence of Post-Modernism. Genres and categories were no longer distinct. The scheme of season that Frye adopted from Frazer was no longer relevant when applied to hybrid genres such as tragicomedy.

In the twentieth century, literary criticism what has helped myth survive is perhaps the embedded symbolism. Word as a symbol in myths is arbitrary both in their self and in their meaning. In the Derridean vein, this affords newer vistas to myths thus keeping them relevant in spite of their archaic origin. Retellings employ words to such an effect that the entire text is a treasure island of contexts.

Myth criticism as per Frye stood subsequent to literature. But the 21st century literary criticism is so strong and colossal an edifice that it acts as a double edged sword. On the one hand, it allows artistic freedom and on the other hand curbs it. A writer is dead by all means once the critics usurps the text and goes on to exploring the context.

Myth criticism equips writers from such an onslaught by bringing to them an awareness of imagery, its origin and the power associated with it. The writer of a myth then has access to possibilities.

Contemporary retelling is a fructification of the adaptation of such possibilities and refinement. Contemporary retellings work with 'timeless' myths and adapt them to fit modern readership.

In the light of interdisciplinary approaches, the relation between literature and myth is rendered complex and complicated. Myth criticism supplies a locus of questions that such complex hybridity can involve. The writers of a myth have to keep in mind whether these questions can possibly be answered in their retelling or can perhaps an understanding be arrived at of the complex pattern that is emerging out of such a story telling process.

Ernst Cassirer, a German philosopher in his monumental philosophy of symbolic forms proposes that a "myth is a form of thought." Cassirer argued that man is a "symbolic animal" i.e. as opposed to the instinctive behaviour of animals; humans create a universe of symbolic meanings. He had argued that science, mathematics developed from natural language and religion and art from myth (much akin to the beliefs of ancient Greek philosophers). Cassirer in his last work *The Myth and the State* claims the return of the irrationality of myth in the twentieth century, in particular, to the rising belief of such a thing as 'destiny'.

Claude Levi-Strauss, a French anthropologist, contributed to the further understanding of myths. He argued that the meaning of myths lies not in their manifest context but rather in their underlying structure of relations. Levi-Strauss suggested that myths are like language. In fact to him, myth was a specific form of usage. At the same time, he also endorses that myth owing to its characteristics is a language unto its own self. The litmus test lies in translation. Unlike most narratives, myths are pliant in terms of translation. Poetry is lost in translation but so is not the case in myth narratives. This phenomenon he attributes to the structural components of a myth which are irreducible and recurrent. He coins the term *mythemes* for these components. In themselves, these units have no intrinsic value but a structural alignment helps them gain meaning. Just as linguistic signs in a combination could do in a given context according to the theory propounded by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure.

Thus *mythemes* derive their meaning from their position and relativity brings about multi-focality. Myths can be retold by a reordering of these structural coordinates. While the horizontal axis of *mythemes* delineates diachronical development, the vertical alignment enables variations.

Myth criticism facilitates the writer of a myth by enhancing his mythopoeic imagination by recording the multiple possibilities of the word and its meaning. The structure and its operation, both exists as polar extremes but myth criticisms helps in bridging their metaphysics.

Myth criticism over the years had taken a back stage; but its powerful legacy has fuelled modern stories churned out of old pots. Frye's work to this day remains influential. Shakespearean and Miltonic criticism is still centre stage. Rene Girard's work on cultural roles of myths is still a striking presence. Girard considered myths to be a natural outcome of rituals. In his opinion, myths revolve around 'scapegoat' themes. Myths have been told from the perspective of scapegoats. When they are turned around in a retelling, the entire power axis undergoes a paradigm shift and is open to accommodate contemporary theory. In his theory, victims in myth are proven to be culprits. Their expulsion or death re-establishes peace. The retelling of a myth in the light of contemporary theory opens it for reinterpretation.

This change in schema has been employed in feminist criticism to a great extent. Simone de Beauvoir uses the myth of creation in order to showcase the subversion of roles by the retelling of the Genesis legend. She writes, "Eve was not formed at the same time as man; she was not made either from a different substance or from the same clay that Adam was modelled from; she was drawn from the first male flank. Even her birth was not autonomous; God did not spontaneously choose to create her for herself and to be directly worshipped in turn: he destined her for man; he gave her to Adam to save him from loneliness, her spouse is her origin and her finality; she is his complement in the inessential mode". (Beauvoir, 165)

Philosophers, anthropologists, structuralists, feminists and other theory practitioners have engaged in dialogics by using myths as a prop. New thought emerges by displacing the old order of ideas to the realm of myths. However, since new theories are constantly deriving from the past they exist in a state of continuum. Cambridge ritualists, C.C. Barber and Mac Caffrey still dominate the contemporary critical scene. The future of myth criticism shall depend upon how mythography features in other allied fields or a heuristic dialogue that perhaps the writing of myth can generate. Myths have been conceived and adapted by so many writers beginning from Homer and Sophocles, Virgil and Milton, Ezra Pound, T.S Eliot, James Joyce and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Contemporary stories will generate critical and theoretical questions. As long as myths exist in literature, they will open the door to myth criticism which will bring about the rebirth of a new kind of myth. Myth criticism on its own does not concern the reader as opposed to other theories such as structuralism or post-colonialism. Old myths will need new packaging in order to catch the fancy of the modern reader and here myth criticism shall go on to contribute significantly.

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