

MYTHOLOGY AND LITERATURE THROUGH A READING OF THREE MYTHS

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Abstract

Mythology and Literature- Literature is the reflection of the society while mythology is a large figure of certain mythical narratives which shape up the respective community's beliefs on religion and the concept of gods. The fulcrum which balances the relationship of both the entities is that both are major forms of discourses. The paper would delve deep into the issue as to what a discourse is and how Literature and Mythology are discourses in themselves. Together they shape the perceptions of the people towards the existence of an authority which regulates the deeds and the actions of the human beings. The paper would also talk about Roland Barthes's seminal work 'Mythologies' and its relationship with how myth making is a semiotic as well as an ideological practice and is not just a process of telling tales to children. The importance of mythical narratives of Indian myths of Mahabharata and Ramayana, the Greek myth of Sisyphus and the Christian myth of loss of Garden of Eden by Adam and Eve would be discussed in the paper.

Keywords- *literature, mythology, discourse, ideology, Marxism, Mythologies, semiotics, karma*

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One of the most prevalent questions which are asked to a Literature student is to ask for its exact definition. When it comes to define something, it becomes a limited. Literature is beyond getting blinkered by definitions. It is rather an essence which encompasses science, psychology, history and such domains along with its own theories. That is why; it acts as a reflection of the society. However, there is one thing which makes Literature, a unique academic sphere. It has the capacity to reflect refracted realities. This means that what we perceive is distorted with certain facts. Literature plays a vital role here. It not only allows the reader/audience to see the distorted version, but also allows knowing the truth as well. Thus, there is a constant interplay between illusion and reality in understanding the ways of the world as well as of life itself.

Each of us has our own point of views which shape up our version of respective realities. The best way to understand this through the childhood stories that our grandmothers used to narrate to us. Our minds used to believe such stories to be true accounts just because it came from the mouth of our elders. Gradually, when we grow up, we tend to narrate them to our children. Thus, through generations and generations, a chain of such truths which have no fixity in terms of accountability and authenticity enter our daily lives. Such stories are called myths. And a collection of such myths is termed as mythology. These are variable in nature and form the base of respective cultures and traditions. Being devoid of fixity, the reality becomes a problematic issue and the whole politics behind their prevalence in the society needs to be understood. It is here that the relationship of mythology and literature can be studied in order to understand the politics. There are certain myths which are the major texts and subjects of discussions in literature as well as their application in life. To what extent such myths have been internalized in the minds of the people? Where rests the logic of such myths? How mythology, as a whole, becomes a major part of literature? These are certain questions which this paper will address taking into consideration Indian myths of

Mahabharata and Ramayana, Greek myth of Sisyphus and the Christian myth of loss of Garden of Eden by Adam and Eve.

The relation between mythology and literature can be understood through the fulcrum of discourse. Both of them are different kinds of discourses. A discourse is a set of certain ideological beliefs and a text with a context. Mythology and literature are also discourses in the sense that both are governed through ideological beliefs and have a context behind them. Herein, lies the politics behind the proliferation of myths in the literary space. An issue becomes a discourse when it has an ideology behind it. If something is repeatedly being passed on generations across generations, then it does carry a lot of substance in it. The substance is that of power praxis. The power is that of believing in a governing force. Here comes the concept of religion which is the topic of discussion since ages. Religion always questions the existence of God/ governing force. This question is the base of human civilization and mythology keeps this question intact. No matter how much we try to not to believe in religion, it is an inherent part of every culture. That is why, myths hold a lot of importance as they keep the question of religion intact. With respect to this paper, the kind of reverence people have towards Rama, the unshakeable faith in Krishna, the universality of fruitlessness of hard work of Sisyphus and Adam and Eve being examples of eternal pain worldwide are the various facets of how these mythologies are literatures in themselves and upholder of religious values.

Now, the question arises as to what exactly a myth is from literary point of view. This can be understood through the work of an eminent literary figure, critic and theorist Roland Barthes. The name of the work is 'Mythologies'. According to this Barthes, myth formation is a process which involves semiotics. It is transference of certain signs over the generations. These signs are the various stories that the elders recite to the children as values, ethics and morals to be inculcated and internalized. In his essay 'Mythologies', Barthes argues that meaning of myth today is a study of a type of speech that gets appropriated from time to time. Myth is a pure ideographic system where the forms are motivated by the concept which they represent by covering the sum of its possible. Literature analyzes this speech through the usage of literary theories and criticism which act as tools to deconstruct the hidden layers of meanings.

The first myth that of Rama's ideality in Ramayana is highly problematic. It is believed that Rama is "*Maryada Puroshottam* and has been an ideal king, ideal ruler and an ideal husband,. However, his act of asking Sita is going through "Agni Pariksha" brings forth the politics of his being an ideal man. Sita was abducted by Ravana but was not

touched by him. However, Rama doubted her loyalty and made her go through the test of proving herself to be pure. How can purity be judged through such practices. Having said that, this myth has been internalized in the society to the extent that it is always the woman who has to prove herself. Undoubtedly, Rama and Sita are considered to be a perfect couple but perfection lies in imperfection. This brings in a feminist angle to the propagation of myths. It is a well known fact that India is a patriarchal country and patriarchy always questions a woman's position.

Language is also phallogocentric. Helen Cixous who is a renowned feminist critic, in her essay, "Sorties" has argued that women must have their own language which she termed as *Ecriture Feminine*. This was much needed because society propagates woman domination through language. Myths were also told from the male perspective. Hence, gender politics is rampant in myths. Cutting of Philomela's tongue stands as the metaphor of woman's silence. By asking Sita to go through Agni Parisksha, her entire existence gets nullified. There is an exemplary animated documentary titled "Sita Sings the Blues" which has been directed by Nina Paley. The movie is a comment on the position of woman in the patriarchal society. It has brilliantly portrayed the stereotypical image of woman and how she always has to undergo sexual politics. The interesting fact about the movie is that the mythical image of Sita has been kept parallel to the image and plight of contemporary woman. This the way how myths have been ingrained in society so much so that they have become the parameters of judging a woman's life.

In this respect, the myth of eternal damnation of Adam and Eve can also be studied. The Myth of loosing Paradise by Adam and Eve and then the prevalence of eternal pain and suffering in the universe is a famous in Christian Mythology. The Primal Sin of eating the forbidden apple was committed by both of them. However, it is only Eve who is blamed entirely. Eve stands for womanhood and hence women in general are blamed from all the respects. This myth is so much rampant in the minds of the people that the entire image is constructed. Hence, she is considered to be the second sex, the one who is responsible for all the pains and sufferings of the mankind.

Simone de Beauvoir said, "One is born a woman, one becomes a woman". The Being is not at all important. The Becoming is all that matters. Such is the power of mythology. It gives the power to justify man's desire to build up hierarchies. Literature, through the contribution of the theorists and critics brings forth these complexities on the surface for deeper analysis. Both Sita and Eve are mythical characters who are

constantly referred to keep the dynamics of gender politics in sync. They are the signifiers of how women are considered to be weak and manipulative. Thus, a semiotics gets builds up.

However, if we tend to view their condition from their perspective, they are most powerful in the sense that Sita was the one who kept on praying for Rama's safety. She did not for once deny her husbands' orders as she believed him completely. She came out successfully thus proving her loyalty. She even came with him for the fourteen year exile. Her power lies in the fact that after going for Agni Pariksha, she did not return to Rama. She went into Mother Earth never to come back. This was her way of retaliating to the injustice meted out to her. Eve in that case, rebels as God blames only her for the act of disobedience. She did not eat the fruit deliberately. She was wronged by Satan. However, the myth does not present or propagate Eve's plight. She faces God with the same argument but in vain. Her grace lies in the fact that she tried to justify herself before accepting the Punishment. However, Religion being patriarchal is the upholder of the fact that women are to be dominated and controlled and mythology to a great extent helps to propagate this fact.

When it comes to hierarchy, there are various facets of it. Another facet of studying the politics of mythology and literature is from a Marxist point of view. The basic tenet of Marxism is that it is a form of socio-economic analysis that analyses class relations and societal conflict. The Indian myth of Mahabharata and the Greek myth of Sisyphus are the examples of how the inequality among the classes has been rampant in mythology as well. In the former one, the character of Karna is among the most popular characters showing both nobility and nastiness over the course of the history. The entire existence of Karna revolves around the complexity of his parentage. He never knew whose son he was until Lord Krishna told him that Kunti and Surya were his parents. This completely broke him. Due to this, he was considered a low born. Here comes the concept of discrimination through caste. Due to the anonymity of his parentage, he had been wronged. Thus, he becomes an ostracized personality and a part of the proletariat class who toils hard throughout his life but is never acknowledged in spite of being a great warrior. On the contrary, Duryodhana takes the advantage of this and includes him on his side. Towards the end as well, it is Karna who sacrifices his Kavach and Kundal and dies an unsung death. Not even Kunti, being his mother, leaves him as he was an illegitimate son.

It is evident that class and caste plays a major role in Marxism. There are various 'Karnas' these days that are being oppressed on this very tenet. And the example is well rooted in mythology. Karna becomes the sign of the oppressed and the sign is getting regulated through generations and generations. Moving ahead, we have the myth of Sisyphus as an example of unacknowledged labor. He toils hard but his hard work of rolling the boulder up the hill keeps on repeating itself. Here, Sisyphus can be considered to belong to the class of the proletariats and God being the person who governs his fate. Sisyphus becomes the epitome/sign of futile labor and hence gets hierarchized. Although Sisyphus committed the crime of deceiving God and hence was punished, the myth in itself is considered to be the complexity of being within the limits and for not having an over-arching ambition which goes beyond the rule of the God. Hence, God becomes the ruling force who sets limits to other creatures. Myths propagate the idea that God is omniscient and omnipotent and hence should not to be challenged. It has been established through the character of Satan in Paradise Lost as well wherein he is banished from the Paradise as he tried to become more powerful than God. This power politics is highly rampant and gets mediated through myths.

When it comes to the concept of labor, oppressor and the oppressed, even Adam and Eve are thrown out of the heaven when they consume the forbidden fruit which was condemned by God. According to the Christian Mythology, the forbidden fruit was the fruit of knowledge and knowledge brings eternal pain and suffering and exposes Man to the ways of the world. . Hence, Adam and Eve, who were innocent souls performing day to day labor at the Garden of Eden, were not allowed to consume the fruit of knowledge. The repercussions were that they both who are considered to be the first man and woman were thrown out without any consideration of their labor on the Paradise and had to face the trials and tribulations the Earth. This myth has been so much internalized in the mind of the society that physical union has become a taboo in the contemporary society. It is supposed to be matter of secrecy and not to be discussed much. The sexual impulses are supposed to be a sin which drove Adam and Eve towards sufferings of human life.

This is the manner in which the above mentioned myths in the paper become a process of semiotics which governs the different ideologies in the society. Literature critiques these myths through the deep nuances and implores the readers to understand that nothing exists in vacuum. Also, there is an element of universality in different myths. This can be substantiated by an eminent author Devdutt Pattnaik's recent work,

“Olympus”. In this book, Pattnaik has tried to showcase the similarity between Indian myths and Greek myths. He illustrates how Olympus is the home of the Greek Gods, much like Amravati of the Hindu Devas, how Zeus, leader of the Olympians, wields a thunderbolt like Indra and rides like Vishnu. Similarly, he mentions how the Greek Epic of husband sailing across the sea to bring his wife, Helen, back from Troy is strikingly similar to the story of Rama rescuing Sita from Sri Lanka. Literature is also universal in nature. Every piece of good art has something similar to convey. Mythology has become a basis of living our lives coherently. Hence, it is an art, art of narrating not just stories but ideologies.

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