

PRESENTATION OF MYTHOLOGY IN THE WORKS OF THE FOUNDING FATHERS OF INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract

India being a land of rich and diversified culture and traditions has a trove of mythological tales and stories to boast of. These tales are not only a source of entertainment and delight to literary enthusiasts but also serve as valuable guides to new generations insofar as they provide various life lessons and values through their narratives. If utilized properly, they can serve as an anchor to our society to hold on to during the trials and tribulations of life. That is why the founding fathers of Indian English Literature rightly delved into classic Indian mythology and not only used old myths and mythological references to highlight the evils of the society, but also presented the solutions suited to modern times. Along with the major writers of the era like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, many other writers like Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanaik, Ashwin Sanghi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anand Neelakantan etc. have given their valuable contributions in this direction. These writers have used the age-old characters and myths to portray both good and evil, meshed them with the present characters of various shades in the contemporary society and then led the readers through the right course of action to be adopted. This valuable influence of mythology in the works of the founding fathers of Indian English Literature has greatly enriched our literature and accorded it with such literary heights that every Indian needs to be proud of.

Keywords

Mythology, Myth, Indian-English literature, Vedas, Puranas, Folk tales.

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Introduction

India has always been regarded as a land of stories, fables and tales that can enchant and mesmerize a human of any age. It's an age-old tradition in India where the stories are passed on from generation to generation. Woven in a fabric of tradition and culture, embellished with ornaments of humor and healthy entertainment, they have, for ages, not only served as an inexhaustible source of education but also helped in the inculcation of values in our society. That is why classic Indian mythology has always attracted the writers and our contemporary writers have never shunned in using various classical myths in their own innovative styles. Authors take the help of mythological references and myths to depict the social, cultural, religious and political conditions of their times and compare the characters and situations based on changing values. Many of the Indian-English writers have used old myths and mythological references to highlight the evils of the society. From the very beginning, the major writers of the era like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao started the tradition of valuing our Indian mythology and the same tradition was adopted by the new generation of writers as well. Along with these founding fathers of Indian-English literature, many other writers like Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanaik, Ashwin Sanghi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anand Neelakantan, Kavita Kane and Ashok Banker also contributed a lot to recreate the old Indian mythology in their works and enriched the Indian-English fiction. They added their own distinctive flavors to the mythological tales, and molded them with the tools of their literary genius to suit them to the modern times without depriving them of their basic aroma. The legendary characters of Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vedas and Puranas always remained a source of inspiration for the authors. These age-old characters and myths are still being used by the writers as a 'Midas Touch' to make their stories magical. Gods, goddesses and demons are incarnated as common men and women through their virtues and vices.

Use of Myth by Mulk Raj Anand

Mulk Raj Anand, one of the greatest Indian-English novelists, who always dedicated his pen to raising his voice against social norms and injustice prevalent in the society, presented mythology in a unique way in one of his novels 'Gauri'(1960). Since his childhood Anand remained greatly influenced by Indian mythology and heard a lot of stories from his mother which left an indelible impression on him. In 'Gauri' he portrayed the misery of women by using the myth of 'Sita' from the great Indian epic 'Ramayana'. The novel 'Gauri' throws light on the significance of the character of 'Sita' in the current social scenario. In the novel 'Gauri', Anand presents the character of 'Gauri' as 'Sita'. Like 'Sita', 'Gauri' is docile, cow-like, shy, meek

and feeble. She is loyal and dutiful to her husband Panchi. Like goddess 'Sita', she is a patient, pure, loving and a doting wife who tries to support her husband in all possible ways, but her husband Panchi doesn't support her when she is in dire need of the same. In fact when his mother Kesaro abuses Gauri by calling her a shameless, filthy woman, he neither protests nor comes forward to protect her. On the contrary, he joins the people who ask Gauri to prove her chastity like Sita. He is a coward and an ignominious character. His spineless attitude is further brought to light when he starts accusing his wife and shamelessly humiliates her by doubting and questioning her fidelity to him. He utters profanities and shouts at her:

"Tell me the truth, bitch?.....What is the proof of your purity?" (Anand, Gauri 262)

Gauri who was always taught to be like Sita, ultimately realizes that she would not be able to survive with Sita-like virtues since she is a normal human being and this is Kaliyuga. With a broken and shattered soul, she gathers herself and shunning her docile and submissive nature decides to boldly face the adversities presented by life. Although mired in a completely hopeless situation, she confronts Panchi and speaks:

"He is a weak, spoilt creature! Spoilt by Kesaro. He pretended to be a lion among the men of the village. But really he is a coward! They are telling him that Ram turned out Sita because everyone doubted her chastity during her stay with Ravana!..... I am not Sita that the earth will open up and swallow me. I shall just go out and be forgotten of him....." (Anand, Gauri 263)

Disappointed but not defeated, Gauri leaves the house of her husband Panchi with her unborn child in her womb and decides to live as a strong woman who doesn't need the approval of this male-dominating society.

Although Anand created the myth of 'Sita' in his novel 'Gauri' yet he reinforced the need for independence for women. He presented this novel as a blend of the mythology and social injustice with women. Gauri who starts her journey as 'Sita', transforms herself into a strong woman. The use of mythology provides grace to the novel and enhances its richness.

Mythology in the Works of R.K. Narayan

R.K. Narayan, another major Indian-English novelist, who is revered for his simple yet impactful writing, also recreated the old story of 'Bhasmasura' in his novel 'Man Eater of Malgudi' (1961). This is the story of Natraj and Vasu. Natraj earns his living by painting. He is a simple peaceful man whereas Vasu, the other prominent character of the novel, is a taxidermist. He comes to Malgudi in search of wildlife. He

starts living at Natraj's place as a tenant where he creates problems for Natraj. His bullying behavior makes Natraj uncomfortable. Natraj's fear swells when he comes to know that Vasu is planning to kill the temple elephant 'Kumar'. He tries to stop him but in vain. The next morning, he finds Vasu dead and later comes to know that while slapping a mosquito sitting on his forehead, Vasu had damaged one of his nerves with his own powerful hand. His own strength became the reason for his death.

In 'Man Eater of Malgudi', R.K. Narayan presents the character of Vasu as a demon who portrays all the qualities of a monster. He is cruel, unethical and lusty. He is against religion and god too. He is evil personified and spreads terror like demons. He rejects the existence and power of God and kills 'Garuda' who is supposed to be associated with Lord Vishnu. At the end of the novel, Narayan creates the myth of 'Bhasmasura' of Indian mythology when he shows that Vasu dies due to his own power. In old Indian mythology, Bhasmasura receives blessings from lord Shiva that he can turn anyone into ashes by keeping his hand on anyone's head, but later he forgets it and keeps his hand on his own head and thus becomes the harbinger of his own death. In the same way, Vasu, who is powerful like Bhasmasura, invites death through his own power. In a very interesting manner, Narayan presents the age-old Bhasmasura story in this novel and establishes the old morals in the modern world. About this work Srinivasa Iyengar says:

"The Man Eater of Malgudi was itself meant to be a modern version of the Deva Asura conflicts of very ancient times. Vasu is the killer of animals, the purveyor of carcasses, the enemy of Kumar, the temple elephant and the tremor of men (the other); he is the blackness all compact, he glows with evil, he is prince of darkness. The evil here is anti-life, anti-nature and anti-faith but where is the power that is going to rid Malgudi of this demon, this cannibal, this Rakshas??" (Iyengar, 382)

Undoubtedly, Narayan remained successful in presenting the old morals and values by combining mythology with modern-age practices. In 'Man Eater of Malgudi', he gives the message of victory of good over evil just like the mythological story of Bhasmasura. About this fiction Mr. Hariprassanna writes:

"In The Man Eater of Malgudi, Narayan follows the same puranic pattern, rendering the ancient myth with credibility using both parallelism and ironic contrast the gentle friendly printer, the representative of all that is good and cherished in the tradition and Vasu, the self-centered, power-thirsty individual. (Hariprassanna, 145)

Not only in 'Man Eater of Malgudi' but also in many of his works R.K. Narayan has used mythology efficiently. His other works that reflect the mythological theme or references are 'The Dark Room', 'The English Teacher', 'The Painter of Signs' and 'The Guide' etc.

In R.K. Narayan's most celebrated novel 'The Guide' too, for which he received the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1960, Narayan uses the age-old story of the transformation of Siddharth into Buddha. Raju, who is the protagonist of 'The Guide', is a happy-go-lucky person. He is an ordinary person with his own vices and virtues. The story takes several turns after he meets Rosy, a married woman who is fond of dancing. R.K. Narayan presents various shades of Raju's character. Sometimes he seems a cheerful and carefree man, sometimes a lover, sometimes an egoist and more often than not a selfish person indulgent in mundane worldly matters. But, unexpectedly, at the end of the novel he converts into a mystic, a saint like Buddha. As Buddha had left the worldly things to get to Nirvana, in the same way Raju also leaves his selfishness and worldly desires for the sake of humanity and becomes a saint, and a philanthropist. He sits under a tree like Buddha, he adopts the personality and actions of Buddha.

Along with 'Man Eater of Malgudi' and 'The Guide', in many other works too, Narayan has used mythical elements beautifully. His other works like 'The Vendor of Sweets', 'The Painter of Signs', 'The Financial Expert', 'The Dark Room' and 'The English Teacher' also emit the same fragrance of Indian mythology.

Influence of Puranas on Raja Rao

Raja Rao, the third greatest pillar of the Indian English literature, always remained heavily influenced by Puranas and old Indian philosophy. Not only did he present Indian mythology in his works but also popularized Indian philosophy in a glorified way abroad through his lectures at foreign universities. Raja Rao's quest for the truth of life finds shelter under the shade of Upanishads and the principles of Advaitavada. His works are clear manifestations of his inner spiritual experiences and it makes him a great preacher of metaphysics. His love for spirituality, Indian culture, philosophy and the old tales is clearly reflected in his works.

His very first novel 'Kanthapura' which made him an internationally acclaimed novelist is replete with mythological references. In this novel, Raja Rao has perfectly blended the theme of the Indian freedom struggle with mythical elements. 'Kanthapura' utilizes the theme of Ramayana, a quintessence of the war between good and evil. Gandhiji and his followers like Moorthy represent godly characteristics whereas British officers are representation of demons that oppress people and spread evil. In Indian culture, the goddess Shakti or Durga or Kali holds a great place and is always invoked by people to get strength, power and protection. 'Kanthapura' also reflects the same kind of tradition when the villagers show their unwavering faith in the powers of Devi Kenchamma for saving and protecting them

during hardships. The village ladies also take on the spirit of goddess 'Shakti' and plunge into the freedom struggle. After the arrest of Moorthy, Ratna takes charge and armed with the strength and courage akin to that of fearless goddess Shakti, not only displays uncommon valor but also encourages the village women to fight against the Britishers. She says:

“Well, ‘we shall fight the police for Kenchamma’s sake, and if the rapture of devotion is in you, the lathi will grow as soft as butter and as supple as a silken thread, and you will hum out the name of the Mahatma,’ and we all grow dumb and mutter ‘yes, sister, yes’.”

(Kanthapura, 112)

Along with the references and myths of Ramayana, Puranas and goddess Shakti, the reference to lord Shiva is also found in 'Kanthapura'. In the novel Jayaramachar who tells Harikatha to the villagers, compares Shiva with Swaraj. He says:

“Shiva is the third-eyed; and Swaraj to is three-eyed: self-purification, Hindu-Moslem unity, Khadder.” (Kanthapura, 16)

In his second novel, 'The Serpent and the Rope' too, Raja Rao has presented his love for folk tales, mythology and Indian philosophy of life. This is a special novel that presents an autobiographical element along with the impact of Indian culture on Raja Rao's mind. It reflects how Raja Rao seeks solutions to his own life problems in the great Indian stories. In 'The Serpent and the Rope' the protagonist Rama tries to see himself in the light of Vedantic philosophy. He finds himself trapped in entangled relationships and tries to understand the difference between illusion and reality. He sees his own identity in the mirror of the Vedas, Gita and Upanishads. The marriage of Rama and Savithri is presented like the union of Shiva and Parvati. They also become the embodiment of Radha and Krishna. Showing her devotion and reverence towards Rama, Savithri says:

“I have known my lord for a thousand lives; from janam to janam, I have known my Krishna.”

(The Serpent and the Rope, 224)

Like the theory of Advaitvada, the novel shows that there is no dualism. Ramaswamy talks about that oneness which is the base of Advaitvada. He says:

“there never was anything but Shivohum-Shivohum. I am Shiva, I am Absolute.”

(The Serpent and the Rope, 197)

Raja Rao's other work 'The Cat and the Shakespeare' reminds the readers of the tales of 'Panchatantra' and the influence of Upanishads on Rao's mind is also clearly visible. An in-depth reading of Rao's novels, makes the readers realize that

Raja Rao always found the fulfillment of his artistic creation in old philosophy and myths. He himself accepted that he had written Puranas but not novels.

The legends of Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas and other old Indian scriptures provide a base and richness to the new stories. Though time and culture are going through a rapid and massive transformation like never before, yet these age-old stories and legendary characters always remain a source of inspiration for authors and novelists. With the help of myths and mythological references many writers have established and justified the much-needed morals and values a society needs to possess. Not only the mythical characters like Ram, Sita Krishna, Shiva, Savitri etc. set standards for the society but also strengthened the new generation to their roots. If used intelligently, mythology enriches and embellishes a literature and that's why many of the great Indian-English novelists like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan have utilized it to simultaneously educate and entertain the society. Being the fathers of Indian-English literature, they paved the path for new-generation writers. Indeed, the founding fathers of Indian English Literature have successfully extracted the social messages and learnings embedded in our ancient myths and mythology, appropriately meshed them with the literature of the present era and through their literary genius have given their readers a treasure trove of information that, if righteously applied, provides realistic solutions to most of the human problems.

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