Chapter Five: Conclusion

The thesis studies the popular cultural phenomenon of resurgence of mythological novels in English in contemporary times in India. Myth has once again rose to prominence in its new cultural forms pervading a wide range of texts like media outlets, films, TV serials, advertisements, novels etc. The present research explores the proliferation of mythological novels in its social, political and cultural context.

It is an exploratory thesis that used various theories and concepts to analyse contemporary mythological novels. Theoretical models and rhetorical devices expounded by the post-colonial critics like Meenakshi Mukherjee, Partha Chatterjee, Pavan Varma, Anthony Giddens, translation theorist like Andre Lefevere, cultural semiotician like Yuri Lotman, cultural anthropologist like Levi Strauss, Marxist critics like Roland Barthes and Fredric Jameson – are used and applied to study the phenomenon. By using an eclectic framework of theoretical approaches drawn from the theories of globalisation, postcolonial studies, translation studies, and semiotics, the contemporary mythological novels are studied and analysed.

Myth has always been exerting a long lasting influence on Indian literature. Life in India gains its current from the torrent of myths and their relevance to individuals and communities. In regional literature as well as literature in English, myth has reserved its notable place in formation of literary forms. The impact of myth is quite evident on poetry and drama in the long tradition of Indian writing in vernacular. It started influencing the writings in English after the arrival of the British. Over the ages, writers have experimented with myth in myriad ways.

The researcher has observed that most of the literature in regional languages in India use myths in a subversive way. Writers, writing in regional languages, by subverting myth in their literary work, expose social, cultural and political problems of their times, irrespective of the form. Some of the works written in colonial era used myths to allegorize the freedom struggle to incite nationalism and to initiate public opinion about slavery and exploitation. Some literary works employed myth to highlight the prevalent caste and gender politics in the society. Still others focussed on the social problems like poverty and injustice. A few literary works extensively used myth to represent the schism between religions, castes, and classes.

A brief overview of Indian English writing unveils the use myth but not in a subversive way. The forerunners of Indian writers in English viz. Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, used myth as mere allusions and references or at the most created characters who corresponded to mythological characters or they tried to parallel contemporary events with mythological ones. The new Millenium ushered in a paradigm shift in the use of myth in the Indian English fiction. From being merely allusive or referential in character, myths began to occupy a prominent place in Indian English fiction. The more recent publications witness myths being extensively subversive in line with regional literatures.

The significant change in the employment of myth from mere allusions to occupying the centre stage, can be attributed to the shift in the target audience of Indian English fiction. The precursors like Raja Rao, R K Narayan wrote for, more or less, the foreign readership beyond the national boundaries, rather than the Indian reader. For the extensive use of myth or for myth to be subversive, a pre-knowledge and an in depth consciousness of the same is a prerequisite. Since the foreign readers were unaware of the cultural basis of Indian mythology, these writers resorted to indirect

references or mere allusions. Conversely, regional writers and contemporary writers have a fair idea of their implied readers who share the same region, language and knowledge of the myth employed. Thus, allowing extensive as well as subversive use of myth.

In the light of Meenakshi Mukherjee's "From Nutana to Puranas", it can be inferred that with the advent of press in England, the novel form found its way in Indian literature within a short span of time. With the introduction of English as the language of higher education in India, English has become a status symbol for the higher class, authority and standards. Thus, a rising trend can be deduced in the reading and writing of Indian English fiction in India. Most of the writers have emulated the English form of the novel. These novels target the English educated elite class.

Raja Rao mentioned in the foreword of *Kanthapura* that Indian novel can be written in an epic style. He succeeded in giving the novel form an Indianised style. The first trio of Indian English writers, incorporated myths to give the novels an Indian colour. Initially these novels were experiments. As the time passed, from margin, they started to penetrate the center. This way, Indian fiction in English has acquired the core (in Lotmanian sense) position in India. There were regional literatures which used myths in a prominent way to fight social evils, British colonialism and other problems. As they were revolutionary and subversive and did not follow the core (colonialism), they remained in periphery. As events in periphery continuously try to invade the core, these novels were gradually translated into English and acquired the place in the core. The new mythological novels written in English, are experiments, unpredictable, revolutionary, as well as subversive. They reserve their place at the periphery. The explosion of these novels in the 21ˢᵗ century can be read in the context of core-periphery relation in Lotman's terms.

The events like liberalization, privatization and globalisation has impacted and questioned many traditional ways of working in India. It brought drastic changes in many areas of knowledge and philosophy. The monopoly and hold of the State on things like expression, TV, news etc. diminished, thus, impacting a large number of people. The milieu provided not only the forum for expression but also the requisite freedom, letting it take different dimensions. Hence, many things are rethought and reconsidered.

The revival of Indian myth in Indian fiction in English is one of the major phenomenon in the history of Indian literature. Many contemporary writers have ventured into utilising myth in the style of regional writers. Their works are rewritings, refractions, or retellings. These novels portray same characters with a different story. They present scientific and reasoned explanations, blend of magic and science, special-effects to give an effect of contemporaneity. At the same time, they reveal social and cultural problems. They challenge caste and gender biases prevalent in the society even today. They are subversive in a way that every protagonist is put to the test of rationale to get accepted. Villains are glorified and faults of the heroes are laid bare. The politics and power are assessed, questioned and contested. Certain naturally accepted myths are problematized, debated and retold.

These mythological novels are primarily meant for the English speaking youth – a particular class that came into existence after the event of globalisation in 1991. This new class belongs to what Pavan Varma calls the 'Great Indian middle class'. This English speaking youth are the major consumers of fantasy thrillers of the west. They find themselves in a void in this era of globalisation. The cultural identity crisis must be resolved and India must be relocated in terms of globalisation. Indian mythological novels in English written after 2000 provide a space – a spiritual domain – to them to

negotiate their identity. The youth has welcomed the re-arrival of Indian mythology in the global context. The themes and contemporary portrayal of the characters make them wonderful, easy reads. The recent Indian English fiction employs myth to cognize the educated, elite Indian youth of their rich cultural, religious past in a light, entertaining manner. Such myth novels endeavour to Indianise. At times, myth is employed to unravel the ideological underpinnings of social, cultural and political issues.

The present research reads these new mythological novels as refractions. They are rewritings of ancient myths, bestowing upon them a contemporary aura. Ancient myths are modified and manipulated to suit the modern period and the modern thought process. These refractions play an important role in the evolution of literature. The process of refraction can be explained by the theoretical model provided by Yuri Lotman. The devices from the semiotics of culture are used to understand the mechanism of refraction.

If these mythological novels are read in terms of Roland Barthes' semiology and his model of myth as 'depoliticized speech', they reveal the underlying ideology. Barthes' model of first and second order semiological system has been used to explore the texts. The novels present the world that seems natural and unquestionable on the surface but contain dark realities of social and cultural lives.

Contemporary mythological novels are considered consumable commodity in Jamesonian sense. They are saleable image of the world that presents glimmering past in the form of Utopia. They control and manipulate historical realities and present them as natural. Once demystified, the problems are revealed on the surface of the narrative. Where the reconstruction of the past provides the narrative an important dimension of interpretation. A careful observation reveals the conflict buried within the text. After

reconstruction of the past, the conflicts can be resolved logically. When read as romances in Jamesonian terms, they embody the innate desire for utopia. They embody social realities symbolically. If attended with careful critique, they reveal the latent conflict buried within their political unconscious.

The novels by Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanaik, Ashok K Banker, Nilanjan P Choudhury, Chitra Banerjee, and Anand Neelakantan are studied closely and analysed. They are analysed with the use of the rhetoric devices like isomorphism, text-within-the-text, inverse image, iconic rhetoric, explosion and unpredictability, core-periphery, semiosphere, refraction, political unconscious and depoliticised speech etc.

Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* (2010-2013) retells the story of Shiva purana in an entirely different manner. The myth is not subverted. The trilogy follows the pattern of same characters but different plots. The novels portray Shiva's journey from simple leader of Guna tribe to Lord Neelkanth. Shiva is given a human portrayal and the trilogy narrates how a man is deified with the passage of time. By raising the issues like Varna system, the evil within, Vikarma law in the Meluhan context, the trilogy can be read as a mediational category to access contemporary reality in a symbolic way.

Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* (2008) deals with gender issues where the rhetorical device of 'inverted image' evidently reiterates such problems in the society. The novel is revolutionary in the context of contemporary period. It challenges the defined gendered roles of men and women in the society. The roles of men and women are altered and inverted. The birth right of men to rule the kingdom, is reverted by portraying him as a pregnant king. The natural role of women to give birth is inverted and she is given a chance to rule. The novel provides a grand vista where these defined and confined roles are negotiated and discussed.

The novels like *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata* (2010) by Devdutt Pattanaik, is a pure retelling of an ancient epic in the modern novel like form. From the title of the chapters to the content of his work, Pattanaik mostly remains true to the original Sanskrit epic, digressing from it at times to fill the gaps, making it a subversive read of the ancient myths.

Ashok Banker's *Vengeance of Ravana* (2012) is a retelling of the return of Ravana after the war. Ashok Banker sees Ravana as the epitome of evil who can never be quelled. He would reappear time and again. The novel is an exact example of refraction. It translates the language of old myth of Ravana into the language of western fantasy thrillers. With magical and unexpected turns into the plot, the novel provides great entertainment to the readers.

The Palace of Illusions (2008) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is Draupadi's Mahabharata. It is studied in terms of 'myth about myth' - 'text within a text' and 'isomorphic' to their core-texts. It subverts the myth of Draupadi from the ancient epic *TheMahabharata*. It raises the issues of caste and gender. It hails a revolt against conventional norms fixed by the ideology of the dominant class. The novel also reveals how the ideology of male dominant society operates in framing the destiny of women like Draupadi.

The novel *Bali and the Ocean of Milk* (2011) by Nilanjan Choudhury chooses the eternal conflict between the Gods and the Asuras as the major plot. As the old version of the myth goes: Devas are always portrayed as the symbol of good and Asuras are portrayed as the evil incarnate. The myth is subverted and presented with its new and colourful imagination, where Devas and Danavas are human tribes. The novel exposes the politics of these groups when it comes to becoming immortal. The novel

throws light on the caste differences also. The churning of the Ocean is materialised in terms of capital gain from Deva's side. The novel is quite subversive in a way that it portrays Indra and Suketu as villains and Lord Viru and Lord Jaya as heroes and saviours fighting for the rights of Asuras. By reimagining the popular myth of the churning of the ocean and getting Amrit in terms of refraction, the novel is full of twists with a cocktail of mythology and politics.

Anand Neelakantan wrote *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012) where he contested the character of Ravana, the chief narrator of the novel. It is not completely anti-Ramayana novel but it reveals the ideological function of the myth in Barthean terms. Till now, the myth of evil Ravana is conjectured and presented to define 'Us' from 'them'. The novel reveals certain untold truths and tries to fill the gap in the original Sanskrit version. The novel provides many hints and examples where the dark history of human nature is naturalized in terms of ideology.

Both, the texts, *Asura* and *Bali* recont the myth of King Bali. They are refractions of the brahminist version of the myth of demon King Bali. The myth of Bali is contested, questioned and interpreted in various ways as it is brahminist, upper class and upper caste. Jyotirao Phule's version of the myth has historical interpretations. Instead of passively accepting the various Avtars of Vishnu, Phule reads them as a strategy to establish caste hierarchy and to justify their dominance in the society by brahmins. Phule bluntly mentions Vaman and Bali as historical figures. The Bali Kingdom was invaded by Vaman Brahmin for gold. Neelakantan too, interprets the Mahabali myth in a similar light. He portrays Bali as a great king who united the shattered Asura tribe and built a great empire during his reign. The great empire is invaded and destroyed gradually by the Devas. Phule and Neelakantan demystify the

myth of Bali by giving it a historical past. All the three authors treat Bali myth in more or less similar way with a dash of sympathy for the Asura race.

These all novels are refractions. They translate the ancient mythology into the modern day language of science and technology like western fantasy fiction and thrillers. They evidently portray the longing for utopia and ideological function of myth. They are romances that embody the contemporary reality of the society in a symbolic way.

The cultural identity crisis among English speaking elite class created by globalisation is being addressed by these novels. They are Indian counterparts of the western best sellers. Thus, the anxiety of Indian identity in the era of globalization renders a valid answer to the resurgence of Indian myths in Indian fiction in English. Apart from that, Myths can be one of the important mediational categories as they have significant role in framing India as a nation. Contemporary mythological novels are the artistic space which contribute to the construction of the nation. They are modern and at the same time represent the sign of national tradition. In this context, mythological narratives can be one of the ways to get access to India or Indianness.

When read as refractions, these mythological novels create spiritual space to resolve the identity crisis for English speaking cosmopolitan elite class to locate themselves in globalised Indian semiosphere. Myth becomes consumable commodity in the era of global late capitalism. When studied closely, they demystify historical and cultural reality that is modified by its ideological function. They are also narratives with romance and magical elements that symbolically embody text's relation with history. They contain deeper anxiety and conflicts in their political unconscious which can be resolved if the past is reconstructed with an attentive critique.