

“Myth in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English: A Critical Study”

SYNOPSIS

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Synopsis

Literature has always shown profound interest and fascination for mythology. Indian literatures are no exception. The Vedas, Puranas and Upanishads have continued to be the fountain-head for innumerable literary works. The popularity and familiarity of Indian mythology has induced the writers of all eras to retell myths of India to suit the modern context. There is an emergence of a new trend of re-writing, re-creating, re-telling, remembering, re-introducing, re-imagining the myths with contemporary perspective in the present century. This confluence of mythology and fiction has become a trendsetter in Indian Writing in English. The emergence of mythological novels in present century and its tremendous popularity require exploration. Questions like how myths have revived in the contemporary era and why Indian mythology has captivated writers and the readers in the present state of technological advancement need to be answered. The current research project theoretically explores the phenomenon of ‘proliferation of mythological novels’ in the present era of globalisation.

To search for the new venues of creative expressions, Authors like Amish Tripathi, Ashok K Banker, Devdutt Pattanaik, Nilanjan P Chaudhari, Anand Neelakantan, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and many others turn towards myth. They use myth in a very prominent way. In their works, myths operate in contemporary Indian context to evolve its new discourse in Indian fiction in English. The thesis studies and analyses the following novels by these authors.

1. Banker, Ashok. *Vengeance of Ravana*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, 2011.
2. Neelakantan, Anand. *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* Mumbai: Platinum Press, 2012.
3. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. New Delhi: Picador India, 2008.

4. Pattanaik, Devdutt. *The Pregnant King*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, 2008.
5. Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, 2010.
6. Choudhury, Nilanjan. *Bali and the Ocean of Milk*. Uttar Pradesh: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011.
7. Tripathi, Amish. *The Immortals of Meluha*. Chennai: Westland Ltd, 2010.
8. Tripathi, Amish. *The Secrets of Naga*. Chennai: Westland Ltd, 2012.
9. Tripathi, Amish. *The Oath of Vayuputras*. Chennai: Westland Ltd, 2013.

From ancient times, myth is usually associated with fiction or fictional stories which include gods or supernatural forces. In his essay *Literature as Context: Milton's Lycidas*, Frye says, "In its simplest English meaning a myth is a story about god" (p-440). Taking this simple meaning as a point of departure, the research intends to complicate and problematize this definition using the theorisation by Northrop Frye, Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Yuri Lotman and Fredric Jameson.

The examination on Indian literatures should not take a single and internal perspective, but should be connected to understanding of contemporary society, and to existing aesthetics and poetics. The discussion on the term 'contemporary' is necessary. Though there are many views about the timeline regarding the historical and economical changes as far as India is concerned, the term contemporary is used in the context of 21st century Indian writings in English. Though many economic, social and cultural changes took place in 1990s, the present research takes the year 2000 as dividing line. As globalisation exploded after new millennia, the identity is being threatened, questioned and erased. According to Anthony Giddens in *The Consequences of Modernity* 1991, "Globalization is the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa." (Giddens, 1991, p-64) Melting away of geographical boundaries, initiation of the advent of multinationals, the intervention caused by globalisation greatly affected almost all national and cultural artifacts like national literature, film industry, television serials, local cafe culture.

The present research attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What role have globalisation and the emerged new elite English speaking class to play in the resurgence of mythological novels in India?
2. Why and how have mythological novels gained unprecedented popularity among the elite English speaking class in India?
3. What are the questions of cultural identity and nation that the texts raise in the context of globalization?

The thesis contains four chapters:

Chapter I: Introduction: Myth in Indian Fiction in English

The chapter discusses various definitions of the term ‘myth’ and explores the use of myth in Indian Fiction in English.

Myth has been studied and explored. Critics and philosophers tried to define myth from time to time in its political, social and cultural contexts. Northrop Frye emphasizes the symbolic weight of certain mythic patterns and topoi. The plot or narrative arises eventually from the metaphorical poetic speech in which myth is represented. In this light, contemporary mythological novels become much similar to “Aristotle’s mythos, narrative or plot, the moving formal cause which is what Aristotle called the ‘soul’ of the work and assimilate all details in the realising of its unity” (Frye, *Literature as Context: Milton’s Lycidas*). Apart from that, in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Frye defines literature as ‘conscious mythology’ and further adds that literature creates an autonomous world that gives us an imaginative perspective on the real one. (pp 120-122). For Claude Lévi-Strauss, myths are the building blocks or governing thought structures of collective human existence. (Mikics, 2007, p-195) Levi-Strauss clearly claims in his *The Raw and the Cooked* (1970), that it is not men think in terms of myth but it is myth that operates in men’s minds without their being aware of the fact.” (p-12)

Roland Barthes, in his path-breaking book *Mythologies* (1972), sees myths as the ideological forms that organize and direct social life and studies myth as a vehicle for perpetuating ideological schemes and exercising power. In the essay, *Myth Today*, Roland Barthes

considers myth as a type of speech - a second order semiological system of communication that is a special preconditioned form of language with a message (p-107). Demystification of myth reveals many delusions and tricks that superficially make up national and social culture.

Interpretation of the surrounding world and contemporary times depends on our understanding and knowledge of frequently told myths and stories. They make us think about ourselves and they are designed to organise the world; hence, connected with personal semiotic space. Aleksei Semenenko mentions in his *The Texture of Culture: An Introduction to Yuri Lotman's Semiotic Theory* (2012) "Any text may in principle serve the mythological function if it is interpreted as the model of reality." (p-40) Myth can be seen as a text in culture that functions not as source of information but as a catalyst of memory that provokes auto-communication. (Lotman, 2009, pp 438-440) "Myth always says something about me." (Lotman, 1990, p-153) They preserve certain model of universe, certain world view, hence; represent type of specific consciousness. We turn to myth again and again as we look at them as a certain cultural entity, a mini-culture. Favourite texts constitute the essence of our cultural self and auto-communication serves as mechanism (text within the text- discourse within) to transform the self into something desirable.

Myths have been used by the authors as a significant tool to expose some crucial debates of contemporary India. Through myth narratives, authors have found a new way to express and discuss multiple issues like casteism, poverty, men-women relationship, economic inequalities, social injustice, extinction of cultural rituals, the problematics of non-secularism, scientific horrors, politics, diseases, communal riots, various movements, extinction of cultural heritage, freedom movement and so on. They are linguistic representations of social concerns and deftly explore the prescription of social relations by means of Indian mythology.

The brief overview of myth in the novels of prominent Indian English Writers like R K Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and others is discussed which is further developed into the use of myth in other contemporary writers like Shashi Deshpande, Shashi Tharoor, Salman Rushdie and others. The chapter provides the historical overview of how myths have been used as an important tool to expose above mentioned issues and challenges in Indian

English literature. The chapter ends by setting the background of the research by elaborating the rationale, it mentions the objectives and methodology of the research in brief.

Chapter II: Theoretical and Methodological frameworks

The chapter discusses the researcher's theoretical strategies in detail.

The thesis speculates various cultural reasons and underlying social dynamics of this proliferation of mythological novels in contemporary times by eclectically drawing upon ideas from the number of theorists and critics like Meenakshi Mukherjee, Partha Chatterjee, Pavan Varma, Anthony Giddens, Andre Lefevere, Yuri Lotman as well as Levi-Strauss Roland Barthes and Fredric Jameson. By combining the various analytical perspectives like Postmodernism, Postcolonial Studies, Translation Studies, and Cultural Semiotics regarding globalization and identity, the chapter elaborates the various approaches for analyzing contemporary mythological novels and for exploring this global phenomenon of resurgence of myth in present century India.

The thesis considers the resurgence of mythological novels in contemporary times as a direct result of the impact of globalization. The phenomena of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation have led to the emergence of a new class what Pavan Varma called new Indian middle class (Varma, 1998, p-178). This urban Indian English speaking youth consumes western best sellers of fantasy and thriller like *Harry Potter*, *Lords of the Ring*, *Twilight Saga*, *Da Vinci Code* etc. to which they need an Indian counterpart. This global popular fiction is rich in terms of folklore, fantasy and mythology. Apart from that this new audience also regularly consumes mythological and fantasy programmes on television that was privatized and digitized after 1990s. Through the mythological novels, the English speaking community endeavours to create a niche at the global sphere by using the myths as one of the strong bases of their identity. Poetics and ideology of this readership that influences the mythological novels is thus influenced by globalization.

With the advent of globalisation, the national boundaries have faded away and have created a certain kind of cultural identity crisis, in phrase of Meenakshi Mukherjee 'anxiety of Indianness', amongst this class which these mythological novels address. Globalization created a void where India as a nation must be relocated. Meenakshi Mukherjee demystifies

the idea of Indianness in her essay *Anxiety of Indianness*. According to her, the idea of Indianness of new generation may be attributed to global market place which demands “Upmanyu Chatterjee’s *English, August* be subtitled ‘An Indian Tale’ and Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* be perceived as National Allegory.” (p-181) Aijaz Ahmad complicates the notion of the literature of the third world as ‘National Allegory’ in his dialogue with Jameson. He argues that the ideological conditions of a text’s production are never singular but always several. He insists that within the unity of three-worlds that has been bestowed upon our globe by the irreconcilable struggle of capital and labour, there are increasingly those texts which cannot be easily placed within this or that world.

Partha Chatterjee questions and contests the idea of the nation in the essay *Whose Imagined Communities?* - a critique of *Imagined Communities* (Benedict Anderson). According to his critique, the nation is created by the material domain (imitation of the west) and spiritual domain (nation culture) in the post-colonial period. The latter consists of nation language created by native elites. They try to make native language fit into ‘modern’ culture keeping the State (material domain) out of its periphery; hence, create their own artistic space (pp 218-219). Indian myths can be the space - in the spiritual domain - created by this elite class. Myth becomes an artistic space, a zone, to declare the identity to the modern world produced and patronized from literature of urban middle class.

Myth as Refractions:

In the context of global events like liberalisation, privatisation, and globalization, contemporary mythological novels in English are rewritings of the old myths into the language of new media technology. They can be seen as what Andre Lefevere terms as ‘refractions’ from Sanskrit and other Indian languages like Tulsi Ramayana, folk-tales or oral traditions primarily meant for new generation young Indian English readers. Lefevere in his essay “*Mother Courage’s Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in a Theory of Literature*” defines refraction as “the adaptation of a work of literature to a different audience, with the intention of influencing the way in which that audience reads the work.” (p-235). Source text is altered, rewritten and refracted due to what Lefevere calls poetological, ideological and patronage related constraints that suits the receptor culture (pp 235-236).

Hence, mythological novels can be seen as refractions that are primarily meant for new generation young Indian English readers and the ideology of present era. If conceived as refractions, these mythological novels while working under constraints and manipulations, express the phenomenon of globalization. The globalisation process can be analogous with what Lotman calls ‘cultural explosion’ where the chaos and conflicts become the key ideas in the generation of new information and texts. The drastic change which is unpredictable - explosion - in cultural and social systems disturbs the conventional balance and forces the systems to receive foreign elements slowly and gradually or rapidly and radically. (Smenenko, 2012, p-67)

The theoretical model provided by Soviet semiotician Yuri Lotman provides the mechanism of how Indian myths are refracted and manipulated to get accepted by the new readers during the cultural change in globalization. It provides us the tools to read/assess contemporary Indian mythological novels in English as means to access and understand/negotiate identity crisis in the wake of globalization. Here, the language of Indian mythology is being translated into the language of modern day science and technology like fantasy and thriller fiction of the West. The transformation of such texts during refraction process takes place at the space what Lotman calls semiosphere. “The rhetoric mechanisms like text-within-text, semiosphere, semiotic tropes, inverted images generate indeterminate, newer and sometimes apocalyptic, sometimes utopian texts through *translational* exchanges between two or more incompatible semiotic systems.” (Sachin Ketkar, Globalising Marathi Semiosphere) Apart from that, cultural semiotics helps to theorise India as nation - a discourse of Self-description generated by core nucleus of the semiosphere by creating boundaries and defining itself against its other in the context of global Indian Semiosphere. Instead of seeing globalized culture as a phenomenon that kills language diversity, it can be seen as a system that produces newer messages, texts and languages.

Myth as Ideology:

The study also uses Barthes’ concept of Myth as ‘Depoliticized Speech’ and Jameson’s idea of ‘Political Unconscious’ to explore contemporary Mythological novels.

In his book, *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes mentions that the function of myth is to transform history into nature. He uses the word myth as an expression of a historically specific ideological vision of the world. He sees myth as meta-language by which it can distort history and removes the possibility to explain its roots. Myth has double function. It points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us. (p-115) Myth is the most appropriate instrument for the ideological inversion which defines the society. (p-142) A historical reality supplied by the world is processed into natural image of reality by 'myth'. Myth is depoliticized speech that functions to empty out reality by giving things a natural justification. By making contingency appear eternal, it removes things from their historical realities and filled them with nature.

Barthes sees myth as second order semiological system that intermingles signifier and signified of form and meaning. Myth becomes mode of signification in meaning making process. This process of signification has to be located into the context of social relationships. They cannot be studied in terms only of system of signs but need to be grasped into certain social and cultural contexts. Barthes argues that myth has to be understood by how it transforms the socially (the interest of bourgeois class) and historically specific (structure of capitalist societies) into something which is natural and inevitable. It is this characteristic of myth which represents itself as universal and natural, that characterizes its ideological function. Myth, a thoroughly ideological process, works by presenting culturally specific objects and relations as if they were timeless, natural, and thus unquestionable.

In his essay, *Postmodernism: the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson mentions commodification of art and other cultural artefacts. The culture has to be commodified and consumed aesthetically and vice versa in postmodern period. In this light, Myths become cultural commodities in the era of commodity fetishism. Being an object of commercialization to sell, myths disguise themselves as the object of enjoyment in the late capitalist era. Myth can be mediation between culture and economic like Levi-Strauss' totem. Being natural and timeless at one time, it also transforms the culture into sellable image of the culture in the advertisement like form. Jameson also states the nostalgia of the sense of the past - to long for utopian society. The retold myths are an attempt to reproduce that glimmering mirage of the past. The fantastic world that these mythological novels project

gives the reader satisfaction or fulfils the desire of utopia. But at the same time they alienate him from the dark social realities like an Ideological State Apparatus.

Further, Fredric Jameson in his book *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* argues that narratives symbolically embody social reality and the surface narration usually mediates the unconscious reality of the text's relation with history. Jameson argues that Romance and magical narratives of medieval era were about present dangers as present narratives will be to future critics. Both contain close observation of the world around them with some of the formal features of Romance. Romance flourishes because it embodies some essential Marxist truth – the desire for utopia. Jameson quotes Frye, “Romance is ‘the ultimate source and paradigm of all story-telling’ would be widely endorsed.” Such discourse, as a system, structures the way that we perceive reality.

Jameson draws upon Freud's ‘wish-fulfilment’ and Levi-Strauss' ‘Savage mind’ to extend the hypothesis that “artistic works can be seen as symbolic solutions to real but unconsciously felt social and cultural problems.” (oxford dictionary online) Any literary or non-literary text offers resolution to conflicts of the society from which it comes out. The social problems can be resolved magically with the help of narratives which in reality cannot be resolved.

Contemporary mythological novels when read in above context reveals the desire for utopia and its relation to historical reality embodied in its ideological functions. They demystify ‘bad’ ideology that reflects some deeper anxiety and conflict in the political unconscious. If attended with stereoscopic thinking, the texts reveals the conflicts buried within. Jameson believes that in any literary late capitalist era, it is a need to reconstruct the prior historical or ideological subtext – that is unspoken and unconscious. The original problem which is latent to which the text is symbolic solution can be reconstructed and bring it to the surface and can be resolved logically.

Chapter III: Myth in Contemporary Indian English Fiction

The chapter analyses selected contemporary novels that use myth in a prominent way. By using the framework of eclectic approaches drawn from the theories of globalisation, postcolonial studies, translation studies, and semiotics, the contemporary mythological novels are analysed. The major writers studied in this chapter are Amish Tripathi, Ashok K

Banker, Chitra Banerjee, Devdutt Pattanaik, Nilanjan P Chaudhari and Anand Neelakantan. The chapter presents a brief introduction to the contemporary writers and their opinions based on their interviews and speeches collected from newspaper articles and internet sources like youtube videos, blogs and webs. The chapter also mentions brief survey of the contemporary writers who revived myth in 21st century India to demonstrate issues.

The novels are analysed according to their thematic aspects. The rhetoric devices like isomorphism, text-within-the-text, inverse image, semantic tropes, explosion and unpredictability, semiosphere, refraction, political unconscious and depoliticised speech etc. help analyse the novels in their social and cultural contexts. Ashok Banker's *Vengeance of Ravana* (2012) and Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* (2010-2013) are examples of refraction where the old mythology is translated into the modern day language of science and technology. They follow the pattern of same characters and different plots. These novels evidently describe the long for utopia and ideological function of myth. Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012) written from the perspective of Ravana and Chitra Banerjee's *Palace of Illusions* (2008) narrated from Draupadi's point of view expose the issue of caste, gender and revolt against conventional norms of the ideology of dominant class. They are 'myth about myth' - 'text within a text' and 'isomorphic' to their core-texts in the globalised Indian semiosphere - already demystified reveal the reality of the society in their political unconscious. In similar light, *Bali and the Ocean of Milk* (2011) by Nilanjan Chaudhary is an example of Deva's cheating on Asuras an indirect demeaning of Deva ideology and customs. Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* (2008) also talks about gender issues where the rhetoric device of 'inverted image' becomes very crucial and reiterates such problems in the society. Besides, novels like *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata* (2010) by Devdutt Pattanaik and Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* contain arguments and questions based on author's research and opinion.

Chapter IV: Conclusion

The chapter concludes the main argument of the thesis with reference to above chapters. Globalisation has created certain kind of cultural identity crisis among English speaking elite class in India. This class regularly consumes the western bestsellers and fantasy fiction need an Indian counterpart. The proliferation of mythological novels which address the cultural

identity crisis is the direct result of globalisation process. Old myths when translated into the language of global media and technology provide Indian analogue of the western best sellers. When read as refractions, these myth narratives resolve the identity crisis by creating a space for English speaking cosmopolitan elite class to locate themselves in globalised Indian semiosphere. Semiotics of culture provides mechanism to analyse contemporary mythological novels. 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.

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. When read as Romances or Magical narratives, these mythological novels reveals the text's relation with history which they symbolically embody. They are the carrier of deeper anxiety and conflicts within the text that can be accessed in Political Unconscious.

The chapter includes the suggestions and recommendations for further research.

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