

Literature and mythology: Nature, Relation and Scope

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Abstract: As we know that mythology has proved to be a great source of subject matter and thematic concern for any work of Art and creativity. The paper will discuss Mythology and Literature, their relationship with each other. The paper will focus on the use of mythology in literature and impact of mythology on literature vs impact of literature on mythology. What are the merits and demerits of their impact. The paper will also discuss about the nature of their relationships, scope of relationship. Limitations in the interpretations of mythology and literature can be seen in broader way.

Mythology is by and large accepted as an ancient branch of knowledge which is prevailing from the ancient times, which is having in it supreme wisdom and which is conveyed through certain characters who come across certain incidents which with worldly wisdom one cannot understand or interpret. Those characters could be human or supernatural. The incident described in the mythology could be simple or beyond the reach of human understanding. No mythology can be approached with scientific approach because mythologies are based on fiction but the meaning which they convey is highly scientific. It won't be out of the way to say here that each country, culture, community and caste has its own mythology. Bell says, "The word 'myth' inhabits a twilight zone between literature, philosophy and anthropology. It means both a supremely significant foundational story and a falsehood..... The double consciousness of living a world view as a world as a world view is importantly encapsulated in modern literary mythopoeia as it unfolds over the course of the century. I emphasize the term 'mythopoeia', or myth making, rather than 'myths', since my concern is not with myth as a traditional content or as a means of literary organization. It is rather with the underlying outlook that creates myth; or, more precisely again, sees the world in mythic terms. Mythopoeia is the underlying metaphysic of much modernist literature, and a way of approaching vital problems that constantly present

themselves reductively". (Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the 20th century p.1&2) Mythology differs from country to country, culture to culture community to community and caste to caste. Of course this doesn't mean that there are no similarities. There may be certain similarities also in mythology of different cultures and countries. Most of the mythologies involve in them human as well as supernatural characters and they present those incidents which cannot be interpreted or understood on the basis of common worldly wisdom. The best examples of Indian mythology and the Western mythology can be given here. In the western mythology as presented by John Milton in his word *Paradise Lost* Satan rebels against God and challenges the supreme power of God. It leads to his fall. This incident can be juxtaposed with the Indian Mythology as presented in *The Ramayana* through the characters of Ravana and Vibhishana. The remarkable difference between the two mythologies is that in the western one evil rebel against good where as in the Indian mythology good rebels against evil. Satan becomes the representative of evil and Vibhishana become the representative of God.

"A myth is a translation of human nature to explain other -wise inexplicable phenomenon of universe, nature of life. Myth is a story that embodies a particular idea with a moral lesson. It is a symbolic imaginative record of incomprehensible reality. Myths have been invented to instruct, explain, and interpret human nature and universe to cope with the hardships and natural event." (Influence of mythology on creative writers p. 8)

It should be noted that in case of the Indian continent most of the mythologies prevailed in the oral form. They were 'Kathas' passed on from generation to generation. Later on they were converted into the written format and they earned the title of an epics: a very long poem with grand theme and great protagonist. The best examples are *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata* and *Savitri* as the recent one compared to the former two. Mythology depicted characters larger than life with those incidences which worldly wisdom finds it difficult to analyze and interpret. Most of the Mythologies have presented complete life of the protagonist with supernatural elements.

Having said this much about mythology let me make one humble attempt to say what Literature is. Literature is commonly accepted as the mirror of life, presenting in it all the ups and downs, all the shades and colors which human existence witnesses. For the subject matter of a literary work, sky is the limit. No other branch of knowledge enjoys so much freedom as

literature for the choice of subject and theme. Literature can have in it any incident for the subject matter and with the writer with his insight and art of using words, expands that incident into a great work of art. If we examine the relationship between Literature and Mythology a strong bond is to be noticed. Both Literature and Mythology have proved to be complementary to each other. Both extend support and add new horizons of vastness to each other. If the impact of mythology on literature is examined, a number of facts emerge before us.

“Mythology teaches you what’s behind literature and the arts, it teaches you about your own life. It’s great, exciting life, nourishing subject. Mythology has a great deal to do with the stages of life, the initiation ceremonies as you move from childhood to adult responsibilities, from the unmarried state into the married state. They have to do with your recognition of the new role that you are in the process of throwing off the old one and coming out in the new and entering into a responsible profession.” (The Power of Myth p. 14)

The first fact which emerges is that mythology has proved to be a rich mine of subject matter for the composition of Literature works. All those incidences and stories which are to be found in the Upanishadas and Epics serve the purpose of a very fertile ground for the writer to pick up a subject and to write a literary work. A writer can have endless subjects and incidents if he turns to mythology for the theme and subject matter of his literary work. There remains a wide scope for such a writer to give new interpretations and new meaning to a given myth which he picks up for his literary work. He can make it relevant taking into consideration his own contemporary time. Whoever is that writer, if he turns to mythology, he would never experience the scarcity of subject and theme. In brief the first impact of mythology and literature is that it has opened a new fertile soil of subject matter and theme for the writer of a literary work.

The second impact of mythology on Literature is in the form of novelty of interest and curiosity which it provided to the reading class. In the contemporary time of busy human life all are not acquainted with each and every incident of the mythology of his own country and culture but when such incidents of mythology are interwoven into the fabric of a literary work, it provides novelty of interest and subject to the reading class. It opens the new avenues of human understanding for the readers and thus widens the horizon of human knowledge.

One more impact of mythology on literature is in the form of certain difficulties which it creates for the reading class. This happens particularly when a reader of one culture reads a literary work which has got in it mythology of some other culture and country. For example Indian readers know the mythological significance of names like “ Sidharath” "Maya", "Gautam" “Mandodari” or “ Vibhisana” and when such a name appears in a literary work, the reader would be able to understand and relate that name to the original mythology and also realize why that particular name has been given to that character. For example, in *Cry, the Peacock* name of the protagonist is Gautam and heroine is Maya. These names have been given intentionally by the writer Anita Desai because husband lives life with a sense of detachment and Gautam whereas wife lives with a sense of an attachment and so her name is Maya. But for a western reader who is not acquainted with the Indian mythology, they are simply the names of characters because that western reader is not acquainted with the Indian mythologies. This is how mythology sometimes renders certain difficulties in the interpretation of literary works.

It is not only mythology which has its specific impact on literature. There is a cross- current of impact. Even literature has its impact on mythology. Most of the mythologies which formerly survived in the oral form would have been lost and forgotten, had they not been documented in the form of literary works. Literature has given a new life rather an immortal life to most of the mythologies of the world. Writing a literary work on a specific incident related to a mythology is as good as giving a new life to that specific incident of mythology. Here the best example is Shri Aurobindu’s ‘*Savitri*’. Very few students today know anything about the story of ‘*Savitri*’ told by Markandeya Rishi to Yudhisthira. But Shri Aurobindo has immortalised this story as well as the myth of Satyavan and Savitri making it available to the students of literature by composing an epic *Savitri*. In this manner literature has potential in it to give new life to mythology.

The second remarkable impact of literature on mythology is that it widens the appeal of mythology and thus universalizes that appeal. Formerly what was known to a limited number of people, becomes available to all the readers of the world when mythology becomes the subject matter and part of a literary work. In other words, mythology get a new audience for its appeal to that audience. Literature can not only universalize and popularize the appeal of mythology but it can also makes mythology relevant in the contemporary times by giving new meaning and scientific interpretation to mythology. Literature helps mythology to sustain its appeal and logic

in the contemporary times. This is how literature and mythology are interrelated, having a cross current of impact on each other. A literary work with some kind of mythological content or theme in it has the ability to give a new identity and recognition to the native country of that mythology. Naturally the people and culture of that country would be proud of that mythology which brings name and fame to the country and culture.

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