

# INTERSECTIONALITY OF MYTH, HISTORY AND CULTURE: A STUDY OF CROSS-CULTURAL BOUNDARIES AND TRANSFORMATION

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## Abstract

Truths cannot be recognized nakedly as they always remain hidden under the clothing of myths. History which claims itself as a bundle of truths also puts on the garments of myths as it passes through times and generations. Besides, truths which constitute a text borrowing materials from myths and history change over time in terms of diverse contexts. So, there occurs an inevitable intersectionality among myths, history and culture. This paper seeks to explore some prominent literary texts to demonstrate how myths permeate human history and culture and create a web which weaves the collective consciousness of human communities.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Culture, Historicity, Textuality, Mythopoeia

## Introduction

Myths are the archive of human memories. Human beings, by instinct, are myth makers because, as Joseph Campbell concedes, “myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation” (3). This inherent disposition emerges out of the vulnerabilities they fail to overcome. True, myths are as old as human beings in this planet. For the demonstration of the essence of human experience and responses, myth can be branded as the ‘panacean wisdom literature across the globe’ (Nayak, P. xiii). Mythopoeia or ‘conscious creation of a myth’ which is called a kind of ‘private’ mythology fulfills man’s desire to explain his life (Cuddon, P. 525). At first approach myth appears to be an untrue narrative revolving round specific supernatural machinery totalizing multidisciplinary discourses and by encapsulating ideologies with a considerably legitimizing philosophy of history it turns into a meta discourse. An in-depth study reveals myth as a text woven with a complicated texture of multidisciplinary meanings encapsulating ethnological and anthropological aspects of human evolution. Also, myths bring out psychological truths that generalize knowledge and provide a structural framework to the narrative that conveys the discursive ideas to the readers.

Thus, subsequently myths assume the role of a dialectical narrative which passes through generations negotiating with all the ingredients of culture and history and legitimizing as well as justifying even religious norms and principles. Myths,

again, are a great metaphor, even a metonymy to speak of culture and history allegorically, critically and ambiguously, as every often, with a view to evading surveillance of the power-structure. Sometimes histories take resort to myths, presenting the stories of supra-human beings outwardly, but in essence critiquing the time in which they are constructed. Myths form a grand narrative which emerges out of the negotiation between history and culture and thus, as Jung believes, take up the role of 'collective unconscious' whose figure making nature "though at work within language, disrupts language, disrupts the rational order of language. This is because the figural nature of the unconscious is difficult to represent in language" (Powell, P. 20). Jeremy Hawthorn refers to Claude Levi-Strauss who asserts 'myth is a kind of thought' (P. 222). Even Roland Barthes claims that myths are connected to not only past but also present as they encode the thought process of the modern life. If viewed from the structuralist perspective, it is found that myths are situated between 'Langue' and 'Parole' and they work as a bridge between these two unpredictable repositories of meanings, and thus they contribute to the comprehensibility, since they work as an apparatus to interpret considerably the incomprehensibility.

Myth is both historical and ahistorical. It proceeds through dialogism with time towards timelessness. A structure underlies in myths and like language it creates meanings continuously that emanate from the dialogic interactions between binary oppositions, i.e. parole and langue. There always exists a space between parole and langue, which is ambiguous, vague and unpredictable. This space creates comprehensibility among cultures and thus myths attain universality due to its engagement with multidisciplinary narratives. Myths aid the learning process and thus form pedagogy, as it is found in Africa and the Subcontinent. For example, the stories in the Panchatantra by Vishu Sharma (also known as Chanakya) were produced with a view to teaching three sons of the king Amarashakti of Mahilaropya in the form of Nitishastra, "a treaties of customary and social laws that teach people right conduct and guide kings to govern for the wellbeing of their subjects" (Nayak, P. xiii). Though the occasion of the production of the Phanchatantra is synchronic, its pedagogical role transforms it into diachronic and thus, myths in various forms penetrate into a community of humanity.

Besides, as myth lies in between langue and parole, it has the capacity to generate meanings endlessly and the understanding of these meanings is equivalent to the understanding of human society from various perspectives. In this regard, it can be echoed with the boatman in Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island, who while narrating the legend of the origin of the myth around the building of Manasa Devi's dhaam in the tiger infested mangrove forest of the Sunderbans tells the narrator Deen Dutta and Nilima:

... The legend is filled with secrets and if you don't know their meaning it's impossible to understand" and then he added: "But some day, when the time is right, someone will understand it and who knows? For them it may open up a world that we cannot see" (P. 17).

Even in this age of cyber technology, it is believed, as it is also said by Joseph Campbell in one of his interviews with Bill Moyars, the author of *The Power of Myth* that "technology is not going to save us. Our computers, our tools, our machines are not enough. We have to rely on our intuition, our true being" (P. 2). Myths are encapsulated with a community's ways of comprehending and interpreting the surrounding world. Various religions of the world have borrowed mythological narratives for the development of theological ground. In art and literature myths have been used for structural framework and universalization of ideas. Even human consciousness is structured as per the narratives of myths. Anthropologists like Levi Strauss looks upon myths as objectively existing structures that adapt to the new cultural forms.

Thus, myths have the power to synthesize diverse human communities with one another. In this connection, Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* can be brought into discussion for exhibiting how diverse religions are brought together on a singular platform to live in harmony by virtue of myths. The novel refers to a dhaam in the tiger infested mangrove forest, the Sunderbans. Legends say, it is a holy place for both Hindus and Muslims. In response to the boatman's narration Nilima, one of the crucial characters of this novel, wonders how a temple can be holy to both Hindus and Muslims. The author goes on:

Nilima had asked if it was strange for him, as a Muslim to be looking after a shrine that was associated with a Hindu goddess. The boatman had answered that the dhaam was revered by all, irrespective of religion: Hindus believed that it was Manasa Devi who guarded the shrine, while Muslims believed that it was a place of jinns, protected by a Muslim pir, or saint, by the name of Ilyas. (P. 15)

But myths and history very often go hand in hand. The dhaam that involves a lot of myths and legends, has now become a historical monument.

Now, at this point, it will be relevant to refer to the 'Prologue' to *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. The myth of Narcissus is incorporated in this chapter. The myth narrates that Narcissus, who was the most beautiful and handsome young man among the mortals on the earth, once came to drink water to a lake flowing adjacent to the forest. While going to drink water with his palms, he bent over the water and was stunned by his own beauty. As soon as he touched the water there

created rippling and his image reflected on the surface of the water got distorted. But he was so fascinated that he continued to stare at his beauty forgetting thirst and hunger. Consequently, he got weaker and weaker due to hunger and thirst and as a result, fell into the water and died. From the place he died there grew a tree named Narcissus. The tree bloomed flower called Narcissus. But strangely enough after his death the water of the lake turned salty. The fairy living the adjacent forest wanted to know whether she shed tears profusely for losing her lover who impressively stared at her beauty. Then the lake replied:

'I weep for Narcissus, but I never noticed that Narcissus was beautiful. I weep because, each time he knelt beside my banks, I could see, in the depths of his eyes, my own beauty reflected.' (P. xii)

Thus, this myth offers a contrapuntal reading of the traditional thought process usually constructed in the grand narratives of a distinct community. It is a new approach to the dialectical knowledge-construction process which obviously, according to the Claude Levi-Strauss, serves "as a laboratory" where a community's ethnographic significances can be experimented with (P. 1). Multiplicity of meaning engulfed in metaphors requires an extensive exploration from ethnographic perspective.

Edith Hamilton, in his book *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, while indicating the generic source of myth refers to Saint Paul who believed:

... the invisible must be understood by the visible. That was not a Hebrew idea, it was Greek. In Greece alone in the ancient world people were preoccupied with the visible; they were finding the satisfaction of their desires in what was actually in the world around them. (P. 16)

Even great epic poet Homer used to believe that man usually wishes to see his manifestations in God and in man's eyes God is the fulfillment of his [man's] 'search for beauty' (Hamilton, P. 16). Hence, Greek gods and goddesses are the anthropomorphic representations of human impulses and they do what the flesh and blood can do. They are imbued with all human limitations, such as anger, hunger, jealousy, libidinous disposition and many more but are never capable of crossing the liminality of man's vulnerability.

Hence, myth turns apocalyptic to the dogmatic metaphysics and the religions in future will require radical rethinking because dogmatic metaphysics will turn into 'poetic theology' and thus "divine world is constantly and miracu

lously begotten by human words in the form of metaphors and myths (Coupe 86). Myths run in with a bold challenge to the religious dogmatism or Logos. Religion divides time into past, present and future and claiming subordination to eschatological belief system. But the “myth of the future (deliverance), like that the past (creation), is always about the present” (Coupe, P. 86). And thus, according to Ricoeur, as Coupe refers, “Myth ... is a social imagination’ which functions by virtue of a dialectic between ‘ideology’ and ‘utopia’” (Coupe, P. 87). Ideology preserves conservation. It takes man in contact with tradition and the past. On the other hand, utopia is a disruptive kind of imagination which prevents ideology from becoming claustrophobic system. Myth involves both these kinds of imagination. And man’s involvement with language and history produces myths.

True, myth constitutes a narrative which is concerned with the origin of everything. This narrative offers both diachronic and synchronic interpretation of human existence. It answers to the philosophic questions in terms of the nature, origin and destination of human life. As myths are adaptable to culture, with the passage of time in connection with culture, it undergoes changes. Version of myths changes because of the fluidity of culture and identity of the community. In most religions myths are used to interpret the spiritual stature of the people in the community. Even myths turn into a logos and then exercises its hegemony upon the community.

Now let us shed some light on the relationship between myth and history. Actually, myths begin where history loses its course. Superficially myth seems to be contrasted with history. It is a common belief that myth is based on fantasy and history is based on fact. But it is undeniable that they “fertilize each other, and it is doubtful whether the one could exist without the other” (Munz, P. i). This fertilization process goes on through the interdependence of both myth and history. History is not totally factual as it is written mostly by those who do not usually play an instrumental role in the incident or event incorporated in the narrative. They are only the viewers or listeners who view or listen from afar. Besides, narrative of the history inseparably runs with analogies, comments, examples which are mostly borrowed from the myths the readers are acquainted with. This amalgamation between these two makes both the narratives readable as well as accessible to the readers even who are not expert in these areas of epistemology. For example, many historical events have been borrowed by many literatures to produce fiction. Mir Mosharraf Hossain borrowed the incidents of Karbala and fictionalized them in his *The Ocean of Grief*. Similarly, we find overlapping between fact and fiction in many literary classics.

Myth has a very close connectivity with power-structure. Many events that practically take place or many things exercised by the power-structure cannot be

scribed as history as the power-structure does not usually let the historians record all their activities. Sometimes myths are used as tools by the power-structure to legitimize its activities opposite to the changing trends on the face of modernity. For example, as Robert Segal mentions, "In England today fox hunting is defended on the grounds that it has long been past of country life. Social myths say, 'Do this because this has always been done'" (126). Segal further goes on that very often myths take up the place of ideology, a guiding drive "that preaches an imminent end to the present society, advocates a fight to the death with the ruling class, makes rebels heroes, declared the certainty of victory, and espouses a moral standard for the future society" (P. 128). In such a situation, people from different belief systems may have chances to do many things that the present time and environment do not support. Thus, myth works indispensably as for both violence and revolution. It is revolution in the sense that it may promote high ideals, values and rituals that help man cope with not only nature but also human nature. On the other hand, by provoking fundamentalism myth may bring about discrimination.

In such a situation, even historians may take resort to myths as an allegory to incorporate history metaphorically. Myth has the power to go beyond the stereotypes of any particular story, time, and community and thought process. Hence, it is synchronic and at the same time diachronic. In this connection, Munz distinguishes myth from history and asserts, "... the myth, although a story of a concrete event, is not a story of any particular historical event" (P. 2). Actually, myth has the power to be accepted universally for the interpretation of any discourse in any place discursively. This universality is the power of myth. The myth of Sita from Ramayana powerfully interprets women's relationship with nature or agricultural land and the patriarchy prevailing in this Sub-continent as well as all over the world even today. This myth may be used as an analogy to interpret eco-feminism or eco-critical studies. The myth of Drawpati and Pancha Pandava incorporated in Mahabharata metaphorically interpret the socio-democratic feudal economic framework of the ancient Indian civilization. Even today different myths from both these epic poems are applied to explain the socio-economic, political and even ethical situation of the present-day life.

Thus, history is very often condensed into myth, and according to Peter Munz, it is a 'telescopic view of history' (P. 6). At first approach, myth may appear to be untrue, but it is significant because it helps us understand other people's conduct that interprets ours, too. Myths are also political as they can be used to incarnate the people in power with the strength and power of God-like Zeus. Myth can be used to subjugate men while it assumes the role of religion and is misused by the power-structure as an instrument, not as a tool for attaining spiritual development. The man who makes myth is capable of distilling the universal features out of history and presenting a picture which draws public recognition as a true story. A

myth interprets the universal patterns of human life, such as fatherhood, motherhood, elements of envy, wrath, vengeance and libido. As a result, people very easily look upon mythic characters as an inevitable part of their life. In this way, the narratives of the myths are assimilated by the communities of human beings. Besides, instinctively every human being tends to share superhuman power and this disposition tempts man to accommodate myths as his own. It does not happen in the case of history. History concentrates on a particular space of time. It is spatial, not universal. But knowledge has an inherent quality to be universal. This inherent drive tempts history to take resort to myths. Hence, the myths of the ancient civilization are mostly the metaphorical portrayal of that very specific civilization. The myths of the Greeks delineate the way of life, psychosomatic features, their education system, pantheon or belief system and the hegemony of the power-structure of the time and place to which these myths belong. Even in the middle age the myth of Manasa Devi, the snake goddess, was used in Mangal Kabya as an attempt to bridge between the upper class and the lower-class people. In this way, myths are powerful in synthesizing diverse groups of people.

The relation between myth and history is characterized by intersectionality. Many believe Homer's Iliad is an account of historical events. The destruction of Troy, as many scholars believe, is historical, not mythical. Any narrative which loses its connectivity with the past may gradually assume the entity of myth. History goes with contingency but myth denies contingencies, asserting that the conditions that exist around us are inevitable and "natural". Myth leads to intellectual provincialism and to the conflict between those with competing views of what social conditions are "natural" (Egan, P. 66). The flexibility that myth sustains is not available in history and this is the reason for which myth has acceptability to all and sundry. Besides, history affirms but myth does not affirm and this is the reason for which myth attains universal acceptance that history can't. Even religion takes resort to myths. Many religions while preaching their ideology make myths which can easily convince the followers. Very often myths are intertextualized with allegory and hence, they turn into text that deserves multifarious readings. Such readings dig out multifarious meanings and these myths are liquid and their liquidity creates spaces for the construction of meanings as required by the changing times and generations.

But myths are not, according to historians like Herodotus, Livy and Burckhardt, "reliable account of historical occurrences" (Heehs, P. 1). But myth has the power to interpret the cryptic truths of human life and they have the shield of metaphor that history does not have. The Greek myth of Sisyphus, for example, metaphorically interprets man's inherent rebelliousness towards the hegemony of power-structure and at the same time man's existential crisis. He struggles endlessly to reach his goal which beacons him to the end of this pain, but he can never attain his

goal and can never free himself from the restlessness of life. This myth has the power of being universal in nature in terms of its capacity to simplify the cryptic philosophy of the existential crisis of man. On the other hand, history nakedly delineates the narratives of the incidents and events of a specific timeframe. But myth and history have an identical focus where both these bodies of episteme work together and this is why "... to keep myth and history entirely separate may not be possible because the two interpenetrate" (Heehs, P. 1). What is history to one may be myth to another. William H. Mc Neil asserts, "But what seems true to one historian will seem false to another. So, one historian's truth becomes another's myth, even at the moment of utterance" (Mc Neill, P. i).

In the Mahabharata it is found that invasion on the part of the more powerful groups upon the weaker groups or community of people is a common affair. The war of Kuru Khetra is a war for power. Kauravas and the Pandavas fight against each other for the throne of Hastinapur. The historicity of this war lies in the political situation of this subcontinent during the period in which this great epic was produced. It manifests the feudal clashes among the kings and lords, which were a common phenomenon of this land. Besides the content, this war constitutes the essence of the Bhagabat Gita. Besides, this war may be interpreted as an intersection between text and history, that is, textuality of history and historicity of text because the transition followed by this war marks the paradigm shift of Kali Yuga, dating it to 3102 BC.

Besides, from moral perspective, this war interprets man's vague conception of what is right and what is wrong. The dubious nature of righteousness or wrongness has been confusing mankind from the time immemorial. This confusion never ends and war which is usually fought for settling this confusion also never ends. Hence, the account of the war of Kurukhetra in the Mahabharata assumes the nature of a very complicated narrative and the inscrutability of this narrative where history, fiction, religion and ethics have been intertextualized.

True, essentially myths have universal importance. But they go through evolutionary process with a view to embracing a wide range of phenomena or achieving more elegant explanation of the time and events that myths encounter with the continuous shifting of time and history. Thus, myths presume its onward move through the mediation and this mediation goes on through allegory and symbols. It occurs because,

Human beings thereby acquired a new capacity to err, but also to change, adapt, and learn new ways of doing things. Innumerable errors, corrected by experience, eventually made us lords of creation as no other species on earth has even been before (McNeill, P. 2-3).

As myths have elastic nature, they go through tentative responses of both the individuals and the communities. Even truths are not absolute, rather contingent. Beliefs, ideas, ideals and even millennium old traditions run through the unending process of appearance and dissolution of human groups. Truths have versions, too. What is sacred to one is unaccepted to another. Hence, consensus or consolidation of truths is always challenged by its ever-rolling flexibility.

Besides, history deliberately excludes some events, people and truths as it is used as an apparatus by the power-structure. So, what history cannot accommodate is housed by myths because they have the mask of allegory and metaphor that work as a shield against the interference of the power-structure. Thus, myths appear to be a text which perpetuates diverse interpretations and analyses. Myths require decoding and as decoding goes on, contrapuntally re-encoding continues perpetually. This nature makes myth more effective in terms of its impact upon people and history. In this connection, while commenting on the relationship between Indian myth and history, Levi-Strauss in his *Myth and Meaning* asserts:

I am not far from believing that, in our own societies, history has replaced mythology and fulfils the same function, that for societies without writing and without archives the aim of mythology is to ensure that as closely as possible-complete closeness is obviously impossible-the future will remain faithful to the present and to the past. For us, however, the future should be always different, and ever more different, from the present, some difference depending, of course, on our political preferences. But nevertheless, the gap which exists in our mind to some extent between mythology and history can probably be breached by studying histories which are conceived as not at all separated from but as a continuation of mythology, (P. 18).

Myths have the power to unite, and contrapuntally myths have the power to divide. If myths are weakened, human communities are weakened. With the advent of monotheistic religions, myths started encountering challenges. Myths in those religions were strictly considered logocentric belief than can never be termed as myths at all. Hence, myths took up the place of religion and thus they started losing their universality which actually radiates their universality. Such theological hegemony tells upon the heritage of myths and drastically brings about distinction among human communities. Myths, of course, have the power to bring diverse communities to the same platform of brotherhood and solidarity. But monotheistic religions brand some myths as blasphemy to their belief system and thus man start losing their inheritance in myths. Christian myths thus become different from Zionist myths and in the same vein Muslim myths become different from Hindu myths. While myths are divided, human communities are also divided and this devastating division set one

religion against another and generates chronic bitterness which devours all good initiatives for bridging differences in terms of religion, caste and creed.

In fine, development of understanding of the universal significance can connect diverse communities of human beings and here lies the spirit of fellow feeling and fraternity. Humankind may find the spirit of solidarity and equality in myths and make a happier and peaceful world.

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