Myth in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English: A Critical Study

Summary

Chapter One: Introduction

Definition of Myth and Myth in Indian Fiction in English

Literature has always shown profound interest and fascination for mythology. Indian literatures are no exception. The Vedas, the Upanishadas, the Epics, the Puranas and classical literatures have provided sources for the plots, themes and characterisation. In the present era of globalisation, there is an emergence of a new tradition of re-writing, re-creating, re-telling, remembering, re-introducing, re-imagining the myths with a very contemporary perspective. Ancient myths are deployed in today's context to provide the matrix of history, philosophy and psychology.

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.

The present research elaborates various definitions of myth and critical theories about myth. 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. Apart from that, Frye defines literature as 'conscious mythology'. For Claude Lévi-Strauss, myths are the building blocks or governing thought structures of collective human existence and he clearly claims 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.

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. Aleksei Semenenko considers myth as the model of reality in terms of its functionality. According to Yuri Lotman, 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. He says that myth always says something about ourselves and preserve certain model of universe, certain world view, hence; represent type of specific consciousness.

Apart from that, the research mentions how term 'myth' has been treated with critic and theorists. The thesis states the definitions by A. Joseph Dorairaj, David Mikics's interpretation of myth in context of Claude Lévi-Strauss' idea of myth, Eric Gould, Malinowski, Don Cupitt, Ratneshwar Mishra, William Bascom, William Righter, Mark Schorer, Peter Calvocoressi, Kirk, Cecil Foster' interpretation of Frye etc.

From Herder's view of myth as allegories to Max Muller's myth as linguistic disease, to existentialists like Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Heidegger' association of myth with basic questions of being, encompassing and nothingness to structuralists like Propp, Levi-Strauss, Todorov and Kristeva's idea of myth as a 'subconscious language' made up of countless system of signs and they offer the poetics of mythic form to poststructuralist

like Derrida's the mythic discourse as a linguistic phenomena, the term has wider implications from various fields of knowledge.

Myths have been used by the authors as a significant tool to expose some crucial debates of contemporary India 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.

Myth though considered as literature at one point, have larger implications in the contemporary times. Myths are always interpreted and reinterpreted, codified and modified to become acceptable. Myth literature by attaining new voices, embodies reality, wrapping of contemporary problems of society, present contemporary history in a newer way, shattering the old cultural hegemony. Most of the time, a situation or characters are taken and interpreted for new social, political and cultural contexts. Characters like Rama, Ravana, Sita, Draupadi, Krishna, Ekalaya, Sambooka, Arjuna, Karna, Sabri, Bali, Urmila, Soorpanakha, Mandodari, Manthara Shikhandi, Shakuni, Bharata and Laxmana, Drona, Karna, Narada and many others are invariably referred to in our daily talks in India. The use of myth in Indian literature can be divided into two categories: 1. Use of myth in Indian regional literature and 2. Use of myth in Indian writings in English. The thesis mentions brief overview of few of the many major works from both the categories.

Dharamvir Bharati, V S Khandekar's *Yayati*, Shivaji Sawant, S L Bhyrappa, P K Balakrishnan, M. T. Vasudevan Nair, Pratibha Ray, Anupama Niranjana, Girish Karnad, Arun Kolatkar, Sitanshu Yashaschandra, Balamani Amma are few of the many who use myth in a prominent way in their regional writings. R K Narayan, Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Arun Joshi,

Upamanyu Chatterjee have also recurrently mingled mythology and historical chronicles to present contemporary social issues and problems. Their works use myth as device or element to serve the purpose.

Use of myths in regional languages are in fact, the examples of subversion of myths through ethical, political interrogation. They break the shackles of ideological conditioning and give voices to the long-suppressed aspirations of the marginalized. But as opposed to the subversion in the regional literatures, the use of myth in Indian Writing in English was very different. From being merely allusive or referential in character, myths began to be extensively subversive in line with regional literatures in the new millennium.

The objective of the research is to explore why and how myth novels have gained unprecedented popularity. The thesis speculates various cultural reasons and underlying social dynamics of this proliferation by eclectically drawing upon ideas from 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. The thesis analyses the concepts of globalization and identity that cast an indelible impression on the selected contemporary myth novels by combining various analytical perspectives like Postcolonial Studies, Translation Studies and Cultural Semiotics.

By taking the simple meaning of myth as 'a story about god', a point of departure, the research intends to complicate and problematize this definition using the theorisation by Lefevere, Northrop Frye, Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Yuri Lotman and Fredric Jameson. The thesis foregrounds the term contemporary the understanding of

'contemporariness'. The meaning of the word contemporary is taken as 'relevant to the current time'. The thesis takes year 2000 as dividing line.

In the context of theories related to globalisation the thesis explores following research 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 attempts to look at the employment, revision, reinterpretation, transformation, recontextualisation, and subversion of myths in contemporary mythological novels.

The words – 'Hindu', 'Hindustan', and 'Hinduism' are studied and explored. From its Persian origin to British Colonialism to contemporary day, the term Hindu is a historical construct. Critics have called Hinduism a colonial, orientalist or brahminical construct. Hinduism is practiced by its various followers which are divided into four major sects: *Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism* and *Smartism*. The first three have a primary deity – Vishnu, Shiva and Shakti respectively. Smartism has five deities – Ganesha at the center, covered by Shiva, Durga, Vishnu and Surya from four sides. It posits equal importance to all five gods. Hinduism prides itself for its extensive store of stories of divinity, of interaction of gods and humans. These stories – collectively known as mythology – focus on the divine power and exceptional deeds of the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. It has its genesis in numerous Sanskrit texts like Rig Veda, the Puranas, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.

The thesis studies and analyses Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* – based on Shiva Purana, Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* – retelling of the stories of lesser known characters from Mahabharata, Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusion* and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* – retelling of the Mahabharata from the two different angles, *Bali and the Ocean of Milk* – retelling of the tale of Samudra Manthan and its consequences, Ashok Banker's *Vengeance of Ravana* and Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* – narrating the story of Ravana from different perspectives.

The chapter mentions brief overview of all the chapters.

Chapter Two: 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. Poetics and ideology of the readership that influences the mythological novels is influenced by globalization. Globalization created a

void where India as a nation must be relocated. The phenomena of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation have led to the emergence of what Pavan Varma called 'new Indian middle class' (Varma, 178). This new urban Indian English speaking youth consumes western best sellers of fantasy and thriller as well as mythological and fantasy programmes on television that was privatized and digitized after 1990s. In terms of Meenakshi Mukherjee, there is an anxiety of Indianness among this English speaking community which these mythological novels address. Contemporary mythological novels are Indian counterpart to those western fantasy thrillers and provide space to negotiate their identity at global spheres. Indian myths can be the space - in the spiritual domain - created by this elite class. In terms of Partha Chatterjee, 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

Contemporary mythological novels in English are refractions in terms of Andre Lefevere from Sanskrit and other Indian languages, folk-tales or oral traditions. They are translation of old mythology into the new language of media and technology. Refraction is a canopy term that covers adaptations, translations, interpretations and so on, retells some story or film adaptations of literary texts. Refraction when used in a constructive way in creating the image of the original, makes original more popular in terms of criticism, commentaries, comparison and so on. This process of adaptation and altering brings in questions of adequacy and authority and includes the issues like subversion and repression. It cannot be possible without certain reluctances that Lefevere calls constraints. Source text is altered, rewritten and refracted due to poetological, ideological and patronage related constraints.

When an old mythology is being translated, the customs, traditions, habits fashions and interest of the target reader are to be considered. The target reader's cultural preferences play an important role in determining the nature of rewriting. When the authors rewrite myths in contemporary social, cultural and political context, they manipulate and modify them to overcome certain constraints in terms of its readership.

The resurgence and subsequent popularity of contemporary mythological novels in the face of current technological advancement can be understood in terms of refraction. While conceived as refractions, mythological novels are constructed and articulated with constraints. They are working under constraints and manipulations that play an important role in the acceptability among the target audience. This modification and manipulation of Indian myths in the modern day language of fantasy and thriller can be seen as refractions that are meant primarily for new generation young Indian English readers – English speaking elites in India. Their popularity express the phenomenon of globalization while working under ideological constraints of the era.

The transformation of such texts during refraction process takes place at the space what Russian Semiotician Lotman calls semiosphere. The theoretical model provided by Soviet semiotician Yuri Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics provides the mechanism how Indian myths are refracted while working under constraints during the cultural change in globalization and assists us to theorize cultural change and globalization. Apart from that, Semiotics of culture assists us to theorize cultural transformation/ variation in India as nation. The rhetoric mechanisms like text-within-text, core-periphery, the boundary, semiosphere, semantic tropes, inverted images, iconic rhetoric, generate indeterminate, newer and sometimes apocalyptic, sometimes utopian texts through *translational* exchanges between two or more incompatible semiotic

systems like the language of myth and the language of modern day science that are non-isomorphic and untranslatable to each other, but are isomorphic at the third level-that of the globalized Indian semiosphere.

Myth as Ideology

The thesis also discusses myth as 'Depoliticized Speech' by Roland Barthes and Jameson's idea of 'Political Unconscious' to explore and analyse contemporary mythological novels.

In the view of Barthes, myth transforms history into nature. A historical reality supplied by the world is processed into natural image of reality by 'myth'. The function of myth is to empty out reality by giving things a natural justification. The term 'real' is used in Lacanian context of individual psyche. Myth, a thoroughly ideological process, works by presenting culturally specific objects and relations as if they were timeless, natural, and thus unquestionable.

Myth as meta-language, distort history and removes the possibility to explore its roots. That way, if accessed carefully, myth provides a historical specific ideological vision of the world. For Barthes every cultural artifact has meaning which is conditioned by ideology. Myth doesn't hide things. Instead, myths inflect or distort particular images or signs to carry a particular meaning in its historical context.

Myth narratives are conceived as metaphorical poetic speech. Social problems are embodied into mythological novels and their past can be reconstructed by the model provided by Barthes. Mythological novels are analysed as second order semiological systems, if read closely and demystified, reveals the problems at first level semiological level.

Jameson mentions commodification of art and other cultural artefacts. Culture is commodified and consumed aesthetically and vice versa in postmodern period. By converting all the cultural artifacts into commodities – simulations, the postmodern condition has overtaken the depth by simulation of reality. Myths too, are transformed into one of the commodities in the postmodern world where information is a saleable commodity. Being an object of commercialization to sell, myths disguise themselves as the object of enjoyment in the late capitalist era. The retold myths are an attempt to reproduce that glimmering mirage of the past satisfying the reader's desire for utopia for commercialization to sell in the late capitalist era as one of the major objective. The fantastic world that these mythological novels project, fulfil readers desire for a perfect world but at the same time they alienate him from the dark social realities like an Ideological State Apparatus. Contemporary mythological novels when read in above context reveal the desire for utopia and its relation to historical reality embodied in its ideological functions.

Literature always embodies history and its presence hence history is in textual forms to be interpreted. Literature is a feature of the unconscious of the text and needed to be recovered by the attentive critique – as it includes one of the most crucial forms of mediation in current society. It is narrative form of literature that play a significant role in mediating individual experience and social totality, through transcoding/ translating into accepted code. Contemporary mythological novels can be an important mediational category to apprehend the political unconscious of such texts.

It is narrative where history contextualises itself by becoming a romance. And romance is the place in fiction most directly to express the 'unconscious' totality of real life. Narrative that mediates our existence from myths to the plot lines of operas and novels, is a key

mode of mediating between 'the individual and society' and 'apparent fragmentation of society and the real totality' underlying it. Contemporary mythological novels are also one of the form of Romance.

Jameson also 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). 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. The task of cultural critic is to find the means of reconstructing the original problem for which the text is a symbolic solution. For Jameson, History is like Lacanian 'Real' that can be accessed only in fragments through mediational categories like narratives. It is a need to reconstruct the prior historical or ideological subtext – that is unspoken and unconscious – to bring it to the surface and can be resolved logically.

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.

Chapter Three:

Myth as Refraction in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English

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 Choudhuri and Anand Neelakantan. The novels are analysed as refractions with reference to the rhetoric devices like isomorphism, text-within-the-text, inverse image, iconic rhetoric, explosion and unpredictability, semiosphere and refraction etc.

The three volumes of Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* (2010-2013) - *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010)*, The Secret of the Nagas* (2012) and *The Oath of Vayuputras* (2013) are also examples of refraction wherein the myth of Lord Shiva is presented as modern day story of a more human Shiva devoid of his divinity and crusading against evil. Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* (2008) presenting the inverted gender roles of men and women becomes very crucial in the contemporary society. The novel recounts number of characters and reimagines their stories in terms of gender discrimination and gender stereotypes. Using the theory of Inverse Image of Lotman, the novel creates an opportunity to break the stereotypes of gender and carry it beyond the male/ female binary. Besides, the book like *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata* (2010) by Devdutt Pattanaik is retelling of the grand epic as its title mentions. Ashok Banker's *Vengeance of Ravana* (2012) is read as refraction with its mingling of magic and science. A great many similarities are visible between this text and western fantasy thrillers. *Bali and the Ocean of Milk* (2011) by Nilanjan Choudhury reimagines the myth of the churning of the ocean. It translates the ancient myth into the modern day language of youth. Chitra Banerjee's *Palace of Illusions* (2008) is a retelling of Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective. The close reading of the text reveals the issues of caste and gender. The concepts like 'text within a text', 'isomorphism', and 'core-periphery' are useful in analyzing the novel.

Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012) subverts the myth of Ramayana in the voice of two major characters Bhadra and Ravana.

Chapter Four:

Myth as Ideology in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English

The chapter analyses the same novels discussed in the previous chapter by using the methodological framework related to ideology developed in chapter two. The texts are read in the light of Jamesonian political unconscious and Barthean depoliticised speech in their social and cultural contexts.

Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* reveals ideology of power and manipulation. Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* (2008) also talks about gender issues and reiterates such problems in the society. *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata* (2010) depoliticises certain myths in modern context. Ashok Banker's *Vengeance of Ravana* (2012) retells the story of Ramayana after the war. It demystifies the idea of dharma and adharma in relation to universal balance. *Bali and the Ocean of Milk* (2011) by Nilanjan Choudhury is an example of Deva's cheating on Asuras an indirect demeaning of Deva ideology and customs. The novel subverts the myth of Deva as good people and Asura as evil. The novel has parallel with the blunt version of Bali myth by Jyotirao Phule. The myth of Bali has been treated and interpreted with various perspectives by crtitics. Two texts, *Bali and the Ocean of the Milk* and *Asura* by Anand Neelakantan, use myth of Bali in different way but closer look reveal that they share some commonality. Both the books have some sympathy towards asura race. There seems a connection of these retellings of Bali myth with the Jyotirao Phule's version in *Gulamgiri*. Translated as *Slavery*, the book demystifies Aryan invasion and Glorious Past. Chitra Banerjee's *Palace of Illusions*

(2008) and Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012) expose the issue of caste, gender and revolt against conventional norms of the ideology of dominant class. These novels evidently describe the long for utopia and ideological function of myth. They are already demystified reveal the reality of the society in their political unconscious.

Chapter Five: 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. 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. They are refractions in Lefevere's term. When read as refractions, these myth narratives attempt 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.