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## **MYTH IN RELATION TO OTHER DISCIPLINES: A STUDY**

Dr. Indhu M. Eapen

Designation: Associate Professor

Affiliation: Department of English, Government First Grade College, Mulbagal, Kolar District, Karnataka (Affiliated to Bengaluru North University)

### **Abstract**

This paper delineates the pervasive presence and influence of myths in various disciplines. One cannot ignore the fact that myths move into the Multi-disciplinary domain in order to show its omnipresence. Myth shares a special relationship with disciplines like history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, astrology, astronomy, biology, geology, fine arts, magic and literature. Myths have elements of explanation as well as fascination. Moral ideals, sociological order, and magical belief are all reflected in myths. The purpose of myth is to instill greater worth and prestige in tradition by linking it to supernatural reality.

**Keywords:** Myth, History, Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology

### **INTRODUCTION**

Classical mythology supplies the contemporary society with an abundance of powerful images, concepts, themes and terms. These myths have been revitalized to suit the modern thought. With the emergence of several disciplines like science, arts, music and literature, many artists, writers and technologists have turned to the classical myths for inspiration and imagery. In fact, myths too have adapted themselves to conform to the altered ideas sparked by intellectual revolutions and technological developments. Myth shares a special relationship with disciplines like history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, astrology, astronomy, biology, geology, fine arts, magic and literature.

### **MYTH AND HISTORY**

Myth is considered the product of oral history passed down from one generation to another. Myth can be historicized and history can be mythicized. There are myths that are based on certain facts in history, like, the Jesus Christ myth, which is considered historical too. A few mythologists believe that myth is a true story, that is, history, and that its contents are an account of events that really took place. It is also believed that myth is sacred history because of the concrete sacral forces that set it going. Some mythologists, however, believe that myth may not be history in actuality, but Para-history, an inevitable branch of history. F.H.Underhill (1889-1971), a Canadian historian and political thinker, is of the view that myth is meta-history, something that is beyond normal history. Myth is also considered to be natural history as it talks about the goings-on in the universe. History usually deals with factual data. The events described in history are those that relate to and affect groups of people and the principal characters are usually the leaders or heroes of the group. Historians

interpret and judge these events too. However, mythic history is the interpretation of events as acts of divine beings or as affected by them. Such an interpretation results in a heightening of the significance of the event. If there are conflicts, the outcome of these conflicts is apprehended as the result of human strategy in history; but in mythology, the outcome is an expression of divine will and judgement. Nevertheless, a few of those important events that took place in history were most decisive in the formation of the myths. Northrop Frye (1912-1991) believes that when a historian's scheme gets to a certain point of comprehensiveness, it becomes mythical in shape. Linking myth with history, Frye has talked about three kinds of historical myths:

1. romantic historical myths in which the myth is related to a quest or pilgrimage to a city of God or a classless society.
2. comic historical myths, which talk about progress through evolution or revolution.
3. tragic historical myths, which detail decline or fall. (quoted in Reinhold 30)

However, one should not forget that while history is the actuality of the event, the mythic idea is a part of the conception of an event.

### **MYTH AND PHILOSOPHY**

Mythology is considered a secret philosophical system because several philosophical and moral doctrines are embedded in myths. Myths were regarded as concepts to preserve the authority of tradition and the moral codes of the society. In the sphere of philosophy, myth attempts to explain 'why' things happen and 'what' can be done to either prevent or enhance them. The life of early man was filled with insecurity, confusion and anxiety; therefore, myths served the function of reducing the tensions and maintaining the stability and continuity of a way of life. Myths served as philosophical doctrines especially in the case of tensions springing from interpersonal relationships, both familial and extra-familial. The daily hazards and frustrations of primitive society, which were often beyond human understanding and control, were the generative forces that brought myths into being. The mythologies were a repertory of guiding patterns for all aspects of life. Bronislaw Malinowski in *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (1926) reiterates that myth "[...] expresses, enhances and codifies belief, it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man" (Malinowski 90). Myths were also considered divine truths and mysteries apparent only to the wise. For instance, the Biblical myths were representations of moral codes and rules of conduct that could be easily imposed upon the society. The practice is still followed in contemporary societies. Nevertheless, as J.F. Bierlein suggests, as we move from mythos to logos, "the passage [is] from a world view based on a universally accepted myth to philosophical speculation about the human place in the universe" (Bierlein 300). However, as recent theories developed, myths were no longer a moral code, but a matter of 'mind' and 'being'.

### **MYTH AND SOCIOLOGY**

As several societies exist in this world, several myths also exist. Myths have been so ingrained into people's lives that the fullness of their lives depends on their local mythology. In fact, a few myths arise based on the living conditions of the society. According to the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), "religion and myth to survive and to grip human hearts must preserve the family and clan structure, providing cement for essential relationships and taboos for injurious relationships, insuring the fullest strength and continuation of the foundations of that society and its harmonious and productive life"

(quoted in Day 209). That is, if a society has to survive amidst several challenges, it has to depend on some of these mythical perspectives because they provide a strong hold of sustenance. The concept of patriarchy, matriarchy, marriage and other such social institutions are shaped by mythologies. For instance, the Amazonians believed in matriarchy in their primitive culture. The same matriarchal society is still found in the present Amazon. Martin S. Day reiterates that an archaic society is a traditional society and therefore myths play a decisive role in bestowing an elevated prestige, enhanced value and higher moral ideal on their customs and practices. Thus, the relationship between myth and society is a mutual one.

### **MYTH AND PSYCHOLOGY**

Classical mythology has greatly influenced psychologists like Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung who, in turn, based their theories on myths. Freud found similarities between the subconscious drives of his neurotic patients, particularly as expressed in their dreams, and the themes contained in Greek myths. According to him, the ideas of immortality and retribution are reflections of our inner psyche. For instance, the Oedipus myth wherein Oedipus unknowingly killed his father and married his mother—the term Oedipal Complex was used by Freud for a mental illness characteristic of a son’s excessive love for his mother. Similarly, the Electra Complex characterizes a daughter’s excessive love for her father. The myth of Narcissus—Narcissus is the handsome, young Greek who fell in love with his own reflection—the term ‘Narcissism’ is used to describe abnormal self-love as the basic emotional root of homosexuality. Medea Complex is another term used in psychology, which characterizes a mother’s hatred or death wish for her children, with accompanying unconscious desire for revenge against the father. Jung, nevertheless, regards the images that appear in dreams and fantasies bearing similarity to universal motifs found in religions, myths and legends. His characteristic archetypal figures are the anima, animus, shadow and self.

### **MYTH AND ASTRONOMY**

The names by which we know the constellations, planets and stars are the mythological ones given to them by the Greeks. The planets of our solar system are named after the ancient mythic gods. Many stars and constellations are also associated with mythic gods and heroes. In fact, the Milky Way Galaxy is connected to a myth of Hera, and Centaur, Cerberus and Dolphin constellations are connected to the myth of Orion. The twelve major constellations which form the Zodiac are also named after mythical animals. In India too, there are myths of humans turning into stars or constellations, e.g. Dhruva or Trissanku.

By 1891, when the first photographic method of astronomical exploration was invented, about three hundred and twenty asteroids had been named after mythological figures. The satellites of planet Saturn and Jupiter were named after mythical generation of the Titans—Hyperion, Tethys, Rhea, Phoebe, Europa, Callisto, Amaltheia etc. The planetoids close to Jupiter were named after the Trojans—Achilles, Patroclus, Priam, Troilus, Ajaz etc. With the advent of Space Science, spacecrafts and propulsion rockets took names from classical mythology. For instance, the individually manned flights sent to space to obtain data on space travel are termed “Project Mercury” after the messenger of Gods. The first such orbital flight, in 1962, carrying astronaut John H. Glenn Jr., was in a Mercury capsule launched by an Atlas rocket. The subsequent two manned flights were named “Project Gemini” (Twins).

## **MYTH AND BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES**

With the modern systematization of the biological sciences, mythology got its link with biological sciences. When societies completely enveloped themselves in natural surroundings, trees and plants became the central figures of myth. Tree worship was very common in the Rajput area of India, ancient Middle East, Egypt, South Africa and even in parts of America. The Tulsi tree is very sacred for the Hindus in India. The Biblical Tree myth is widely talked about in mythological circles, as it is symbolic of the Fall of Man, its motives, the event and finally its consequences. Perhaps the most revered tree is the Bodhi tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment. The tree is also considered a protecting womb and a saviour. Similarly, plants and bushes were also mythologized. Perhaps, the most sacred flower in the world is the lotus. Lotus is supposed to possess a maternal womb and therefore it symbolizes womanhood. The mythic, therefore, considers woman and lotus as “true sisters” sharing the same function and fulfilling it in similar ways. Animals have also been a part of mythology. The aquatic animals have had a lot of significance in earlier mythology. For instance, Fish is symbolic of fertility due to its reproductive capacities. In Pacific myths, the crab is symbolized as the “Terrible Mother” as it snatches the souls of the dead on their way to paradise. Tales of mermaids have always fascinated mythologists. The seal is attributed feminine characteristics too. However, for the ancient Greeks, the most favourable and luck-bringing mythicized sea creature is the dolphin. Apollo Delphinus (“dolphin-like”) indicates a dolphin-god ancestry as the temple of Apollo at Delphi had carvings of dolphins upon its walls. The whale has also been mythicized among the Eskimos and the peoples of the Pacific. Terrestrial animals are mythicized too. For instance, the cow is symbolic of feminine nurture, the bull is the father figure, the horse is symbolic of power and speed (Asvin— Indian mythological god), and the monkey is a symbol of nobility and courage (Hanuman in Indian mythology).

## **MYTH AND HUMAN ANATOMY**

The human anatomy is also named from classical mythology. For instance, “the first cervical vertebra of the neck, which supports the head, is called the Atlas [...] named after the Greek god Atlas who supported the earth on the shoulders; the term Achilles tendon [is applied] to the sinew above the heel [...] named after the Greek God Achilles” (Reinhold 5). In Greek mythology, when Achilles was born, Thetis tried to make him immortal by dipping him in the river Styx. Since she held him by one heel, which remained untouched by the water of Styx, that part remained mortal. As a result, during the Trojan War, he was finally killed by an arrow in the heel, the one place where he could be mortally wounded. For this reason, any weak point in an otherwise solid defence is called an ‘Achilles heel’. In human anatomy, the strong tendon that connects the muscles of the Calf of the leg with the heel bone is called the ‘Achilles tendon’. The coloured disc of the eye surrounding the pupil is called the Iris, after the Greek goddess Iris, who served as a messenger of the gods. She specialized in bearing messages from the gods to human beings, and to do this, she frequently had to descend from heaven to earth. The logical stairway by which this might be done was the ‘rainbow’ and ‘iris’ is the Greek word for ‘rainbow’.

## **MYTH AND GEOLOGY**

Even before Geology developed as an aspect of science, Geomythology was prevalent as a part of mythology. Several myths were based on the landscape, earthquakes, volcanoes and the atmospheric conditions. The whole globe itself was considered Mother Earth and the

caves, her womb. In fact, every feature of the earth's surface is attributed to a supernatural agency. However, the major categories of geomythological accounts include land formations, earthquakes, volcanoes and floods. According to mythology, "the landscape is the product of willful supernatural beings" (Day 396). One instance of land formation from Indian mythology is 'Gaurishankar', the highest of Indian Glacier caps. The myth behind this is as follows: "the earth mother, Gauri, divinely paired with Shiva to dispatch precious waters of life from the dazzling top of the world to the famished plains below" (Day 396). Earthquakes were considered the work of a subterranean beast whose movements cause the shaking of the earth. Floods also carry along with them several mythical ideas. Generally, floods are associated with divine wrath over human taboo violations, human carelessness or human viciousness. The flood myth is also symbolic of a wiping clean of creation to permit a fresh re-creation. Thus, mythology intertwines with Geology too.

### **MYTH AND FINE ARTS**

One way in which the divine can be made real to the imagination is by identifying it in terms of objects that have dimension and form, outline and substance and colour and texture. This was exactly why the painters and sculptors started depicting gods and goddesses in forms that could be grasped and held by the mind. The impact of art can be profound and it can affect the way in which individuals view themselves and their society. Thus, the human relationship with the cosmos was given an identity by these painters and sculptors. Scenes depicting aspects of a myth often adorned the walls of sanctuaries, places of worship and other such public places of interest. Thus, the artist makes a statement in his/her work of art and that mythic statement is again open to varying interpretation by individuals who internalize what they view. On the other hand, the twentieth century painters and sculptors also sought inspiration and motifs from classical mythology. For instance: Picasso has been deeply influenced by the classic myths, using them, for example, in his painting *Ulysses and the Sirens* and in many ceramic pieces with Greek fauns and nymphs as subjects.

### **MYTH AND MAGIC**

Magic, according to Malinowski, is the most important and mysterious aspect of primitive man's pragmatic attitude to reality. Magic is found wherever the elements of chance, accident and danger play a decisive role. Magic also provides the main controlling power in the pursuit of game. It helps in the bridging-over of gaps and inadequacies in situations that are not completely mastered by man. When ordinary circumstances fail human beings, magic helps them with a definite success. Myths provide worth and validity to the performance of magic. Malinowski provides an example of this connection between myth and magic with regard to the 'magic of love'. In one of the Melanesian tribes, there lived a brother and sister along with their mother. The brother had prepared a love potion for somebody else, which his sister drank by mistake. Overcome by passion, she seduces him and when they realize their mistake, they die together. An aromatic herb grew through their skeletons and the tribe believes that this herb forms "the most powerful ingredient in the substances compounded together and used in love magic" (Malinowski 85). Thus, magic is also a part of mythology and vice versa.

## MYTH AND LITERATURE

Myth is very closely connected to literature. A few mythologists believe that myth became literature through intermediary forms like legends, folktales, fairy-tales, ballads etc., while a few others believe that metaphor is the linking unit. The German author Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) is of the opinion that mythology and poetry are one and inseparable. According to him, if people believe that mythology is characteristic of a particular place, they should also accept that such mythology is preserved in a highly sophisticated literary form. Thus, when we read Euripides or Ovid, we have to remember that they are literature made out of myths.

Myths are treated as serious commentaries on contemporary life. Classical myths were revitalized to bring out this effect. Authors, poets and dramatists usually went back to Greek and Roman myths for plots, symbols and themes to illumine the present through the myths of the past. According to Meyer Reinhold, such a practice would give “heightened significance to the pettiness and ugliness of contemporary life through contact with the heroic grandeur of man portrayed in many myths” (Reinhold 400). Thus, mythical heritage becomes eternal models to provide a broader view of man transcending a specific time. Beginning from the Renaissance, English literature has made prolific use of classical mythology and writers have found in myths powerful metaphors to describe their own contemporary issues and dilemmas (e.g. Tennyson’s and Joyce’s Ulysses, Arnold’s Empedocles or Eliot’s Tiresias).

According to T.S.Eliot, myth in literature “[...] is simply a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history [...]” (quoted in Reinhold 400). Therefore, myth can also be used as objects of satire in literature. Along with it, sometimes, the basic story of a myth is transposed to a contemporary setting with characters wearing modern clothing and using modern idioms. One instance of this is Marc Connelly’s play *The Green Pastures* (1930), which is a re-interpretation of the Biblical myth. In this play, Jesus Christ is portrayed as a Black, smoking cigarettes and wearing modern clothes; however, the incidents are similar to the ones narrated in the Bible.

Sometimes, a re-interpretation could also suggest an existential point of view, like for example, Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Flies* (1943) which is an existential re-interpretation of the myth of Orestes and Electra. Some of the recurrent themes in mythology that have been borrowed into literature are Fire-theft, Deluge, Land of the Dead, Virgin Birth, Resurrected Hero, Father-seekers, Father-slayers, Mother-murder, Eternal Return, Incest, Catastrophe, Slaying of Monsters, Sibling Rivalry, Castration, Androgynous deities etc. Thus, myths serve the function of a cultural fitting when it is included in the field of literature.

## CONCLUSION

Therefore, we understand that myths have become a part and parcel of human lives. Myths may die and get resurrected as the society changes; however, the need for myths does not die because man craves for order in this universe. There are elements of both explanation and interest in myths. The myths provide a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order and magical belief. The function of myth is to strengthen tradition with greater value and prestige by tracing it to a supernatural reality of events.

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