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**Redefining the Significance of Myths  
in the Context of Contemporary Culture Identities**

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**Abstract:** *Myth, which has been the part of culture in many civilisations of the world, has been interpreted into multiple ways by many scholars across the globe. Being the work of high imagination, myth kept on appealing people throughout the ages but with the advent of science and technology, the significance of mythical stories reduced to a great extent. Myth was being regarded as Mythya, the false stories. However, the term regained its importance as some of the scholars like J. R. R. Tolkien, Devdatta Pattanaik and Amish Tripathi started retellings of myth and psychoanalytical critics like Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung brought out the significance of myth in shaping human mind. Although myth is not seen as what it was seen as in ancient times, it has retained its charm and popularity to the present day.*

*The present paper attempts to understand the meaning of 'myth' and the larger structure called 'mythology' to which certain 'myth/s' belong and to explore the reasons of universal appeal in myth/s of particular group in general and mythologies in particular. It is an attempt to understand the nature, structure and significance of mythology in shaping human psyche and to compare the basic patters of popular mythology in different parts of the world.*

*Key Words: myth, culture, identity, universal appeal etc.*

The word 'myth' is derived from the Greek word 'mythos', which means a traditional tale common to the members of a tribe, race or nation. It usually involves the supernatural elements to explain some natural phenomenon in bold imaginative terms. Today, myth has become one of the most prominent terms in contemporary literature analysis. Mythology has been perpetually fascinating the human race for ages and generations. It has remained an element of great emotional appeal for the people of all the religions. With the passage of time, myth becomes part of the culture and is often seen to be reflected in literature. Early literary works of all the civilizations of the world are found to be greatly influenced by its myth. The most popular mythologies that entered the culture and human psyche are Greek and Indian. Greeks however, gave up myth from their cultural life but Indians still continue using mythology as the part of their cultural as well as emotional life. Egypt, China, Latin America and Africa also continue to live with their mythology as the part of their culture even today.

Myth is the interpretation of the unconceivable facts or events related to heavenly bodies and mysteries of the universe. Most of this interpretation is based on the personal appeals and emotional ties of the interpreters. It can be occasionally true and also can merely be a fiction. Whether there is truth behind the myth has been a matter of debate. Attempts have been made in the past to establish myth as metaphors unveiling the nature of objective and subjective universes. However, there are no evidences to prove that every myth is metaphor for philosophical understandings of the universe. Nonetheless, the argument that myth is an expression of well understood facts about the nature of human mind and mysteries of the universe cannot be discarded at once. It has certain points of validity. India is the country of traditions and rituals. Myth is deep rooted in Indian culture and psyche. It is impossible to

imagine Hindu religion without its rich mythology. Myth in Indian language is translated as 'Purana'. There are eighteen main *Puranas* in India. These *Puranas* are also supported by other texts called *Up-puranas*. Indian mythology is structurally organized to support its claims to be true like Greek mythology, Roman mythology and other popular mythologies.

Western world has long ago forsaken myth for the logic and scientific outlook. Their myth is nothing more than the fictional stories build over a specific time period. They no more consider mythical stories to be true stories. Indians however, believe in their mythology. It forms the part of their culture. Myth in India has also given rise to rituals which still continue to exist in many parts of the country. It is said that man is the product of environment. Rituals become the part of culture during the course of time. Therefore, it is not possible to separate myth from the culture.

The attempts of demystifying mythology in the wake of age of reason have been made by many scholars in the contemporary times. The popular myth of Delphi, for instance, is said to have scientific base. Oracle of Delphi was believed to narrate the future of a person, group or a country. There are many stories which show that the oracles of Delphi never failed. A detailed inquiry leading to understand the truth behind the oracle of Delphi lead people to think that there must be some chemical in the waters of Delphi which used to intoxicate the priestess to enable her to foresee incidents. It is said the magnesium cause the effect of frenzy which made the priestess to tell future. However, no such element was found in the rock of Delphi. But the story does not end here. There is a group of people who believe that the rock might have lost its charming properties with the course of time.

With the advent of science and technology people started questioning the mythically narrated stories. They came closer to the realities of the universe and the mysteries of physical phenomenon were scientifically brought before the people. Still myth remains one of the most significant elements shaping culture and emotions of the people. "Myths are first and foremost psychic phenomena that reveal the nature of the soul". (Jung 7). It is the appeal inhibited in the myth which does not allow people to give up myth. Among multiplicity of reasons, the tendency of human mind to think and rethink about a particular thing repeatedly told, can be called major cause of everlasting effect of myth which does not allow humans to give it up totally. The fascinating effect of myth is so great that despite mythical narratives being proved to be fictional stories, people find them highly appealing and its patterns keep on recurring through the time and place. It is therefore, not possible to give up myth even in the modern world of logic and reasoning.

There are many scholars who have been also trying to understand myth and the points of appeal it involves. The scientific temper of the modern world does not stop people from thinking about mythical stories in general. In fact, they have started looking at it with the scientific point of view. "Mythological symbols touch and exhilarate centers of life beyond the reach of reason and coercion" (Campbell 49). Frye rightly comments, "The axioms and postulates of criticism have to grow out of the art it deals with". (Anatomy 6)

Most of the ancient cultures are full of myths. In fact, mythology is not only the part of their cultural life but also governs their cultural and personal life. Myth is a single story in any of the mythologies. The modern connotation of the word 'myth' in some cases may be the 'false story' but it need not be necessarily a 'false story'. It can also be a true story. Therefore, any

attempt to attach the negativity of meaning with the word 'myth' is not acceptable. Multiple myths form a mythology. Operationally, it is defined as a body of interconnected myths (stories: true or false), told by a specific cultural group to explain the world consistent with people's experience of the world in which they live.

Anthropologically speaking, the word myth, as stated earlier, is derived from the ancient word of the same spelling and pronunciation which connotes its meaning in general terms as a 'story' or 'plot'. But the term was not applied to all the stories in general. It was specifically applied to the sacred and secular stories. These stories were believed to be true stories by the respective cultural group. In fact, these were believed to be the only true stories. The reason for believing myth to be a true story or mythical stories to be the stories about the ultimate reality can traced in its structural unity. Mythology is a larger structure in which myth finds its expression. Mythology is logically built structure of narratives. Any particular myth becomes the part of comprehensive mythology when it complies with mythology in relation to its themes and characters.

At the first place, myth begins as the group of sacred stories or it can even be a single story that offers systematic explanations for the creation of the universe. The vast expanse of the universe is unconceivable for human mind. Its mysterious nature tempts humans into speculations about its origin, nature and governance. Mythology not only offers explanations for the creation of the universe but also speaks about the mystery of human life and death. Any myth can only be understood in relation to the mythology it is part of. For example, the 'Myth of Prometheus' is the part of 'Greek Mythology' and can be understood only in relation to whole of the 'Greek Mythology', the larger structure it is part of. Having no knowledge of Greek mythology in particular, a person would not be able to understand myth of Prometheus independently.

A mythology, therefore, is a belief system that often concerns supernatural beings or powers of culture which provides rationale for the culture's religion and practices and reflects how people relate to each other in everyday life. However, mythology of every culture attempts to explain the origin of the physical universe. The interpretation of natural phenomenon is encapsulated in a story or stories forming a general body. Though all the mythologies attempt to find the origin of the universe and/or tries to give explanation for 'how the universe came into being', the mythology of one culture group which has been of distinct origin or having had no contact with other culture group differs from that of the other culture group.

Greek mythology for instance has different interpretations of the heavenly bodies and Indian mythology deals with them differently. The origin of the universe which forms basic premise of myth differs in its understanding in Greek/Roman and Indian mythology. Greek mythology speaks of the origin of the universe from the only primordial being called 'Gaia' which is identified with Roman 'Terra Mater' or 'Mother Earth'. Mother Earth according Greek mythology gives birth to 'Uranus' or 'Sky'. The union of heaven and earth is said to have produced the first generation of Greek gods called 'Titans'. The 'Titans' who produced 'Olympians' were captured and sent to the dark region of 'Tartarus' by their own progeny under the leadership of 'Zeus', the supreme god in the Greek mythology. 'Zeus' of Greek mythology is identified with 'Jupiter' of Roman mythology and 'Indra' of Indian mythology.

A close study of this mythical interpretation of Greeks can be easily understood if the ancient beliefs and understandings are logically taken into consideration. The universe was

interpreted as the earth centered for ages. Western world considered the earth to be at the center of the universe and all other heavenly bodies were supposed to be rotating around the earth. By simple logic of human understanding it can be argued that the center is the primary creator. As the earth was believed to be at the center of the universe, Greeks thought that the universe begins with the earth. Creation is often conceived in two opposite forces called male and female. Earth being a female, needs to be given the credit of being first primordial and hence, the first creator. She is then believed to give birth to heaven. Thus, begins the natural order of creation. Earth and Heaven represent the feminine and masculine forces respectively. It is necessary for feminine and masculine forces to copulate to create further. Therefore, the union of heaven and the earth is said to have given birth to powerful 'Titan', 'Cronus' identified with Roman 'Saturn'.

Cronus is believed to be all devouring. Cronus who is personification of time was overthrown by Zeus, his own youngest son. With Zeus's arrival the departure of Cronus is prophesied. Zeus represents the culture and power. Zeus also represents law and order. Therefore, all devouring time has to be imprisoned by the culture. Thus, Greeks had their own self formulated theory about the origin of the universe in the existing form. One common thing seen in all the mythologies is that the interpretation of physical universe is often personified for the understanding of common people. Of course, there are multiple factors contributing to this kind of interpretation and representation.

Mythological stories are also seen to be contradicting one another in most of the cases because it has variety of topics to deal with and innumerable things to be interpreted. In Greeks for example, there are many primordial deities which are also said to have born to some of the Titans or Olympians. Chaos, Aether, Gaia, Uranus, Eros, Erebus, Nyx, Tartarus are generally regarded as primordial deities by Greeks. Uranus, Tartarus, Erebus are also believed to be third generation deities. Similarly the Olympian Aphrodite and Oceanus are also believed to be primordial in some versions of Greek mythology.

Indian mythology also speaks about the origin of the universe. However, there are multiple versions of the story of origin of the universe in Indian mythology. Most of the Indian mythology about the origin of the universe comes from the Puranic stories. Puranas are regarded as mythical stories. The origin of universe in Indian mythology has two versions namely 'Shaiva' and 'Shakta' The 'Shaiva' version believes that the universe and everything else originates from lord Shiva while the 'Shakta' believes that the universe originates from Shakti. The Shaiva version credits masculine force for the creation and the Shakta version credits feminine force for the creation. However, there is one more version which believes in union of feminine and masculine forces for the creation of the universe. These two forces are identified as Purush and Prakriti in Indian mythology.

The realm of mythology is not limited to the interpretation of the physical world and speculating about the origin of the universe. It goes beyond that and speaks about other things also. When it speaks about the reasons for world being what it is today and future of the world, it assumes a philosophical tone. When it speaks about the simple things happening around the humans in a particular culture it becomes ritualistic. In short, myth is a way of telling why things, places or manners are like what they are like at present. Myth and mythology expresses a culture's worldview. It expresses people's conceptions and assumptions about humankind's place in nature and the universe. It also gives an expression to people's limits and working of the natural and spiritual world.

One important thing most of the people tend to forget is that being a non-believer, one would often too quickly discard the religious and sacred stories of other cultures as mythology or myth - as the term myth in modern sense as mentioned above means 'a story sans truth'. But someone who intends to understand the difference between myth and religious belief of the other cultures should strictly resist the temptation of being dismissive in impulse. In fact a serious cross-cultural study would consider everything that comprises the culture, including its mythology - because mythology also forms the part of the culture.

Having said that myth cannot be discarded as the false story, it becomes necessary to understand how significant it is in the human life and what role it does play in shaping an individual. If an attempt to interpret the world is to be dismissed at once, there are so many things that need to be discarded to make life too mechanical to experience any kind of pleasure and joy that arises from the mysteries around us. Myth theory and literary criticism is a newly evolved interdisciplinary field in humanities that draws upon anthropology, classics and philology, folklore, history, language study, linguistics, literature, psychology, philosophy, and other field to offer greater insights.

It is commonly seen that all the cultures create their own stories and narrate them to the world around them. Speculation is one of the significantly important characteristics of human mind. It tends to build certain analogies and engage in creating an understanding about the things around. As creating and narrating stories is an important human characteristic, myth making also needs to be understood as an important human creative activity. Myths, stories, legends, folklore, tall tales cannot be dismissed negligently calling them to unworthy of attention because they give valuable insights into people's perception of the world and their general outlook towards the world around them. The modern world generally tends to disbelieve the mythically narrated incidents and persons. Nonetheless, mythical stories, legends and folklores are often seen to be surviving as vessels of important cultural values and beliefs. Even when a culture no longer believes them to be true explanations, people cannot give them up totally.

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