



Myths in Select Novels of R. K. Narayan and Shashi Deshpande

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Myths in Select Novels of R. K. Narayan and Shashi Deshpande Abstract The use of myths in fiction and non-fiction by the writers is not a new or recent phenomenon. Since long the writers incorporated myths and legends in their pieces of writings to shape the existing culture to their choices. Western writers like T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and W. B. Yeats employed myths and made them meaningful. Indian writers such as Mulk Raj Ananad, R. K.

Abstract

The use of myths in fiction and non-fiction by the writers is not a new or recent phenomenon. Since long the writers incorporated myths and legends in their pieces of writings to shape the existing culture to their choices. Western writers like T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and W. B. Yeats employed myths and made them meaningful. Indian writers such as Mulk Raj Ananad, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Girish Karnand, Khushwant Singh, Devdutt Patnaik, Amish Tripathi and Shashi Deshpande used myths in their writings. The myths can serve the truth of the culture or may serve falsehood depending upon the interpretations of the texts by the readers. Myths can persuade or dispirit someone to follow certain behaviors and situations mentioned in the novels. The present research article focuses on the use of myths in select novels of R. K. Narayan and Shashi Deshpande. The attempt has been made to incorporate different myths and their relevance in the present context. It also tries to figure out the difference in incorporating the myths in novels by the novelists. The purpose of using myths in writings may differ. The paper shows the attachment of R.K. Narayan to the cultural values through his using myths. Deshpande seems neutral in using myths in her writings however she (re)defines the traditional roles of women.

Key Words

R. K. Narayan, Shashi Deshpande, Myths, Hindu culture, Society, tradition.

Introduction

Myth is a driving force behind most of the religious practices. Its vitality and dynamism can

be seen in the great proselytizing movements, in crusades, religious battles and in the creative endeavors that caused man to build huge tombs and places of worship with all kind of riches and precious things. Almost all the religions in existence and practice have a large number of myths, which are woven around them to strengthen existing faith. In this regard, **Encyclopedia Britannica** states:

Myth is not an explanation in satisfaction of scientific interest but a narrative resurrection of primeval reality told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions and assertions even practical requirements. Myths fulfill in primitive cultures an indispensable function, it expresses, enhances and codifies belief, and it safeguards and enforces morality. It vouches for the efficiency of rituals and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. (Encyclopedia Britannica 134)

In literary studies, the interpretation of myths is of prime importance. A myth can be explored as a symbol, an image, an allegory or a concept in a literary work of art. It imparts innumerable meanings to suit the transforming order of the society. Legion of writers provide mythical dimension to their literary creations. Through the mythical dimension, these writers reveal the binary context between the past and the present and connect the readers to thousands of years old traditions. Such use of myths also gives manifold meanings to their literary works. The present article focuses the use of myths in the select novels of Narayan and Deshpande. It tries to show the similarities and differences in their use of myths.

The novelists taken for study make abundant use of myths. They consider that myth and literature are interconnected and are the suitable aesthetic expressions of human's thoughts and emotions. It can be clearly seen that their view of human life is influenced by the religious sense of Hindu myths. For them, myths offer different patterns of traditional motifs for inducing the new meanings. Hence they extensively use myths from varied sources.

It is clear that some of the novels of Narayan have their structures based on the classical Hindu mythologies. These novels present inevitable victory of good over evil, the laws of life and the doctrine of *karma*. In **The Man Eater of Malgudi** (hereafter **The Man Eater**), the Bhasmasura myth has central importance. The work presents the conflict between the good and the evil, the 'Sura' (God) and the 'Asura' (demon) - a recurrent motive in the Hindu Mythology. Vasu is a demonic creature in the fiction. He possesses enormous strength and genius, but he recognizes no sort of restraints of society or God. Through his activities, he puts others into troubles and for that he doesn't care. Shastri, an employee in Nataraj's press, explains that, "Vasu shows all the definitions of a Rakshasha (demon)" (Narayan, "The Man Eater" 94). He is well versed in the scriptures in Sanskrit and so he could foresee the destruction of Vasu. He, particularly, refers to the mythological story of rakshasha- Bhasmasura, who is bestowed with the boon of scorching everything he touches. However, Bhasmasura destroys himself, when God Vishnu in the guise of a gorgeous dancer- Mohini persuades him to emulate her gesture of placing her palm on her head. Fittingly, in Narayan's reworking of Bhasmasura myth, Vasu destroys himself with a blow intended to kill two troubling mosquitoes that have landed on his forehead.

Narayan's another work **The Painter of Signs** (hereafter **The Painter**) exhibits a striking similarity between the myth of king Santhanu in **the Mahabharata** and the love story of Raman and Daisy. According to the myth, a beautiful damsel agrees to marry the king Santhanu on the condition that he is not to question any of her activities, when she becomes his wife and that she would desert him the moment he breaks the condition. At the end, the condition is breached by the king and she leaves him, revealing her identity to be Ganga, the sacred river.

In **The Painter**, Raman like king Santhanu is so much infatuated with Daisy that he is prepared to accept marriage at any condition laid down by her. Daisy is a modern girl, whose past like Ganga is

shrouded in a mystery. She doesn't believe in love. For her, it is simply a romanticism created by the literary man. She pursues her mission to prevent the population growth with a religious intensity. For her marriage with Raman, she lays down two conditions - first that they should be childless, so that she should be free from household responsibilities. If, by mistake one is born, she would give the child away and continue her social work. She straightforwardly asks him, "... if you want to marry me, you must leave me to my own plans even when I am a wife. On any day you question why or how, I will leave you" (Narayan, "The Painter" 159). But at the end, Daisy leaves him to continue her pursuit of a vocation which flies in the face of older ideas of Indian woman's role. Although there is a suggestion that they will live together in their next incarnation, Raman is left to go back to the life, which he cherished prior to meet her.

Likewise, Narayan's **Talkative Man** is another retelling of Hindu mythology. According to Hyacinth Wyatt, it is "blending of the myth of **Narada** and that of the myth of **Savitri and Satyavana**" (Wyatt, R. K. Narayan as a Brahman Writer 30). According to the first myth, sage Narada was one of the first great seven rishis born from God- Brahma. He was advised to marry by his father, but he refused to do so. Later he was cursed to lead a life of sensuality in subjection to women.

Like Narada, Dr. Rann in **Talkative Man** is an incorrigible philanderer. He is constantly on run with one or another of his mistresses. In this way, he can be seen as an avatar of Narada. Although Dr. Rann is constantly on the run, his wife pursues him with doggedness and devotion of a loving wife. The novel recounts her search for him without disappointment. Here the wife of Dr. Rann is reminder of the myth of 'Savitri and Satyavana' in which Savitri successful followed Yama- the God of death, to restore the life of her husband, Satyavana, after his death.

Thus, it is obvious that the structures of the novels namely **The Man Eater**, *The Painter* and **Talkative Man** are based on classical Hindu mythologies. Narayan makes use of a single mythology to operate in these novels. However, he uses different symbols from various Hindu myths. For example, in **The English Teacher**, the search of a new house in southern direction by Krishnan and Sushila can be correlated with the mythical trip of Savitri, who follows Yama in the southward direction in Savitri-Satyavana myth. In the myth, Yama moves ahead in the southward direction after taking life of Satyavana. Savitri pursues Yama even in the region of death to get back the life of Satyavana. Likewise, in the fiction, the visit in search of a new house is also southward. This visit causes the sickness of Sushila that leads to her death.

It is also clear that in the myth and the novel, the concept of life after death is elucidated in detail. Death is viewed as transformation of life. Yama shows the living Savitri an ugly vision of the region of the death whereas in the novel, Sushila keeps alive the concept of the life after death by communicating to Krishnan after her death. The novel describes Sushila's transformation into a spirit after her death.

Besides this, Narayan also provides references of various myths in his works. In **The Man Eater**, he gives reference of Puranic mythology of elephant Gajendnra, who is threatened by a crocodile. The elephant cries out desperately for help and God- Vishnu saves him from the mouth of crocodile. In this novel, Nataraj prays God- Vishnu to save the elephant- Kumar from Vasu's attack. He thinks that if the God had come once, "he would come again to rescue of the same animal" (Narayan, "The Man Eater" 180). Consequently, Vasu's death in the novel suggests the mythical parallel. It teaches the moral lesson how the innocents are always saved and the demons like Vasu have to face evil consequences of their **karma**.

Shashi Deshpande is a leading Indian novelist and popular for portraying women oriented issues in her writings, which are not discussed previously. She uses myths from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana and tries to establish the fact that women are made conscious of the culture and values of

the existing society through myths. She is of the opinion that women are compelled by patriarchal norms to imbibe and follow these myths dutifully. She used myths abundantly in stories such as **The Day of the Golden Deer, Hear Me Sanjaya, and The Inner Rooms**. Here the concern is of her women oriented novels namely **The Dark Holds No Terror** (hereafter TDHNT) and **That Long Silence** that confirm to the fact that woman is buttoned up by various myths.

The myth of Dhruva, the son of Suniti, employed in **TDHNT** serves an analogue to the story of Sarita, a protagonist of the novel. Uttanapada was a king and had two sons from his two wives namely Suniti and Suruchi. When Dhruva was in the lap of his father, Suruchi pushed him to make a place for her own son. Dhruva then goes to his mother and informed whole incident. Mother advised him to pray to the father of all mortals. He did and his prayers answered by God, Vishnu. He was made into the North Star. Sarita has a younger brother named Dhruva. He is given much attention by the family members being a son. One day she pushes Dhruva off her father's lap. The intensity of dislikes of Dhruva by Sarita in the novel and Suruchi in the myths is compared. After Dhruva's death by drowning in the novel, she as a child is disliked by her parents and this curse continues throughout her life.

The myth of Gandhari from the Mahabharata is employed in **That Long Silence** by Deshpande. It is linked to the life of Jaya, the protagonist of the novel. The myth narrates that Gandhari tied a cloth on her eyes out of her own volition realizing that her husband was blind. It shows her sense of becoming an ideal and dutiful wife. The general consideration of the society is: a wife must be few feet behind her husband. Gandhari's eyes and her vision would make her superior to her husband. The relation between Jaya and her husband, Mohan is on the same track. She ignores initially the happenings going on in the home and concerns only luxury and comforts of modern day life. She distances herself from reality of life. She blindly believes her husband and his acts like a supposed ideal wife in the society. Later she comes to know that her husband is involved in corruption case in the office. Still she keeps quiet and accepts. She thinks:

If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife. I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I did not want to know anything (Deshpande, *That Long Silence* 61).

The problems in relationship arise with the malpractices charges levied on her husband in his office. She is ashamed of this incident and accuses her husband for wrong doings. But he defends by saying "It was for you and the children that I did this..." (9). He puts a blame on her and she proves to be an ideal wife.

Conclusion

Thus, Narayan and Deshpande use myths basically from Hindu scriptures such as – *the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, the Bhagvad Geeta*, the epics like *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata*. Their perception of these myths is ideal one. In Narayan's fiction, myths act as illustrations of ethical and spiritual principles in Hindu philosophy providing cultural education to the masses. They signify the struggle between the conflicting values – *dharma* and *adharma* and the final victory of *dharma*. Whereas, in the novels of Deshpande, the use of myths reflect her feminist viewpoint, showing gender discrimination in the Indian society. It can be surmised that the myths are made from the patriarchal perspective. The above discussion makes it clear that these two writers interpret the contemporary society in the light of ancient myths and legends. By applying mythical method, they highlight the complexity and chaos of modern life and bring to light various facts regarding the predicament of human beings in the contemporary society. Significantly, their novels present the relevance and magnitude of these myths in the modern times, which is distinctive achievement of these two novelists.

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