
MYTHOLOGY AND THE BUSINESS OF ITS CONTEMPORARY RETELLINGS

Dipanvita Sehgal

Research Scholar, University School of Humanity and Social Sciences,
Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, New Delhi, India

Dr. Naresh K. Vats

Asst. Professor, University School of Humanity and Social Sciences,
Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, New Delhi, India

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Abstract: The word ‘myth’ in general signifies any story that is believed to be a work of fiction and which is considerably old; however, when analyzing myths and legends, it is important to understand the evolution of the word and through the usage of the word, delving into human origins. Mythology (which comes from the Greek word *mythos* that means ‘story of the people’, and *logos* which means ‘word’ or ‘speech’, which makes the meaning of the word ‘the spoken / written story of a people’) is the study and interpretation of sacred tales or fables of a culture known as myths.

A number of events described in mythology, which were considered mere fairy tales at one point of time, have been archaeologically proven to have actually happened. The city of Troy is one such example. After being considered a city of myth for the longest period, Heinrich Schliemann’s discovery of the actual site in 1868 elevated it to a place in history. The rest of *The Iliad* is, however, still viewed as myth. Similarly, the Kurukshetra site has been excavated to prove that a battle did take place there at the same time around which Mahabharata is centred. However, the magical elements written in Epics have not all found due evidence. Contemporary retellings of Hindu Mythology and otherwise have tried in a similar fashion, to prove to new age readers that their deities were in fact real people; humans, who existed, had their flaws and have only been labeled as Gods over time and space. This idea of Gods as humans in their own times and scientific explanations for the ‘miracles’ in the epics brings young readers closer to the characters in their epics, helps them relate to them and encourages them to stay in touch with their scriptures, even if it is by way of reading fictional novels. Retellings often discuss aspects of the human condition, like good and evil, character follies, the meaning of suffering, human origins, importance of nature and animals, cultural values, and traditions and larger philosophical questions like what constitutes the meaning of life and death, and so on exactly like mythological tales. The only difference is that the execution of each idea in contemporized so that a new age reader can relate to it from his or her own times.

Keywords: Myth, Mythology, Retellings, and Contemporization.

Myth and Mythology: The word ‘myth’ in general signifies any story that is believed to be a work of fiction and which is considerably old; however, when analyzing myths and legends, it is important to understand the evolution of the word and through the usage of the word, delving into human origins. Mythology (which comes from the Greek word *mythos* that means ‘story of the people’, and *logos* which means ‘word’ or ‘speech’, which makes the meaning of

the word ‘the spoken / written story of a people’) is the study and interpretation of sacred tales or fables of a culture known as myths.

Scientists and philosophers started questioning the truth and validity of traditional myths, thereby giving birth to the skepticism that changed the meaning of the word. Later myths became limited to fictional tales of superstition or fantasy tales. This is how the definition of the word ‘myth’ is viewed in present day context; ‘a story without proof of its existence’.

However, a 400-year old story should not be assumed to be false merely because it lacks proof or evidence to support its claims. It is possible that myths were, in fact, a way for people to explain real and perhaps perplexing events using the knowledge and beliefs of their time to help society learn and imbibe its culture and morals and values through the help of the supernatural or the magical to keep them engrossed.

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The stories of ancestors and the human origin, the Gods, supernatural beings (satyrs, nymphs, mermaids) or heroes having super-human powers (as in the case of Heracles or Perseus of the Greeks and Shiv and Rama in contemporary retellings of Amish Tripathi) are told through Myths. They may also explain natural occurrences like the sunrise and sunset, the cycle of the moon, the seasons, or thunder and lightning storms or describe nuances age-old traditions according to scholars Maria Leach and Jerome Fried.

According to psychiatrist Carl Jung, myth is a necessary aspect of the human psyche, which needs to find meaning and order in a world, which often presents itself as chaotic and meaningless. Jung writes:

The psyche, as a reflection of the world and man, is a thing of such infinite complexity that it can be observed and studied from a great many sides. It faces us with the same problem that the world does: because a systematic study of the world is beyond our powers, we have to content ourselves with mere rules of thumb and with aspects that particularly interest us. Everyone makes for himself

his own segment of world and constructs his own private system, often with air-tight compartments, so that after a time it seems to him that he has grasped the meaning and structure of the whole. But the finite will never be able to grasp the infinite. (23-24)

The infinite referred to here, is the quality of the mysterious, holy, and powerful which provides mythological tales and themes with their basic charm since it gives human existence, a final meaning. In this uncertain world, direction and hope for protection is provided for, by the concept of something more powerful than one's self. According to Leach and Fried, the mysterious, holy, and powerful is "a concept of the human mind from earliest times: the basic psychological reaction to the universe and environment which underlies all religion". (777).

Present day 'Mythology' should actually be remembered as religion of the ancient past. Ancient mythological tales served the same purpose for the people of the time as the stories from accepted religious scriptures do for people today: they comforted and directed a community of like-minded believers and, further, provided them with a feeling of unity and protection. What contemporary retellings of Amish Tripathi do in their novel form is very similar to this. It brings believers and non-believers together to either enjoy a fresh look at their scriptures that is more relatable and not far removed from reality or to simply enjoy an informative and engaging piece of fiction.

Scholar Joseph Campbell notes how mythology is the essential form of every civilization and the strengthening of every individual's consciousness. In his seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he discusses what he calls the "monomyth", the similarities in theme, characters, purpose, and narrative progression of myths from different cultures, at different times, around the world and throughout history. Campbell writes:

What is the secret of the timeless vision? From what profundity of the mind does it derive? Why is mythology everywhere the same, beneath its varieties of costume? And what does it teach? (4)

The answer, ultimately, is that myths teach meaning. The life of a believer is elevated from a routine existence to one filled with eternal meaning, through empowerment and stabilization of mythology. On the most basic level, a myth explains a phenomenon, tradition, place-name, or geological formation but it can also elevate a past event to epic and most importantly, provide a role model for one's individual journey through life. Tripathi in his novels roots to create those boy or girl next-door role models for the contemporary audience.

Retellings and Amish Tripathi: A.K Ramanujan in his essays like "Three Hundred Ramanayas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," and "Classics: Lost and Found" has highlighted the nature and reason for retellings of the epics and provided readers with a new lens to study them. He explains in "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" that no Hindu ever reads the Ramayana or any of their epics for the first time. Listeners of oral traditions and readers of the epics could take up the story and recreate the characters, the sensibilities, the theme, the plot and so on (Ramanujan, 131). This legitimized the status of retellings of epics thus opening platforms for critical study in the domain.

While most religions serve the purpose of instruction and help followers learn moral lessons, Hindu scriptures push the reader to discuss philosophy as well. Abstract concepts of Dharma (duty) and Karma (action) are discussed through various stories like that in the

conversation between Shri Krishna and Arjun during the Kurukshetra war. Of course the scriptures also discuss a moral code and how not following it leads to consequences. Take for example the story of Ahalya; wife of a saint who sleeps with Lord Indra by mistake (some critics speculate she knew it was Indra who had impersonated her husband). Her angry husband turns her to stone for centuries. The story serves to warn society about wives going astray. But modern renditions of the story like the recent short film Ahalya that is available on YouTube, emancipates the woman and leaves more power in her hands than the earlier woman of the mythical story.

An array of writers is attempting to revisit myths and legends and giving them a thoroughly non-traditional twist. If Amish's *Immortals of Meluha* envisages Lord Shiva as a tribal Tibetan leader who lived around 1900 BC, in Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: The Tale of the Vanquished*, Ravana questions why his death is celebrated when all he did was to challenge the gods for the sake of his "daughter Sita" and free a race from caste-based rule. And in Ashok Banker's recently published *Epic Love Stories*, he wonders if King Dushyanta really did forget Shakuntala or if he had "complex" reasons for not contacting her.

Mythology has driven contemporary writers to the creation of innumerable books; whether it is Banker's Ramayana, Mahabharata and Krishna series, Sangeeta Bahadur's *Jaal – Book 1 of the Kaal Trilogy*, an epic about a superhero rooted in Vedic concepts of how the world was created; or Samhita Arni's take on Sita's disappearance, called *The Missing Queen*. There are also writers like Manil Suri who has used mythology as a metaphor in his book, *Death of Vishnu*.

"The tradition of borrowing from Indian mythology is not new," says Gautam Padmanabhan, CEO, Westland Ltd. He gives the examples of M.T. Vasudevan Nair's retelling of the Mahabharata through Bhima's eyes in *Randamoozham* or Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee's take on the character of Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions*. Devdutt Patnaik's *Pregnant King* and Shashi Tharoor's *Great Indian Novel* were also based on mythology.

Vaishali Mathur, senior commissioning editor at Penguin, feels that Indians who have grown up on a diet of mythology want to read these stories in a "contemporary format". Having published Devdutt Patnaik's *Pregnant King*, she says that the main difference between the earlier mythology-based books and the more recent ones is that the latter are in the fantasy and thriller genre.

The audience is able to resonate with these contemporary versions of their old mythological tales since the writers have considerably turned them around. So the anti-heroes become heroes, and the gods become humans prone to using expletives like "s****" and cheesy pick-up lines like "I feel as if I know you from somewhere." Many of the characters have been thoroughly contemporized too. For example, in *The Missing Queen*, Kaikeyi has been portrayed as a cigarette smoking, chiffon-and-pearls clad matriarch.

Perhaps young readers like to question the beliefs and ideas in our myths, and explore what "might have been" or could be, says Divya Dubey of Gyaana Books.

"Earlier, Indian English writers used to write fiction for Western audiences with an eye on the Booker," says Mumbai-based Anand Neelakantan, who is now planning a two-part series on the events of the Mahabharat as told from Duryodhana's point of view. "Moreover, we write in simple English aimed at readers who regard English as an Indian language," he adds.

Neelakantan's *Asura: The Tale of the Vanquished* was reportedly among the top three biggest selling books at Crossword last year.

However, Amish feels that the popularity of this genre lies in mythology being part of our DNA. "We are just reviving an ancient tradition of modernising and localising myths that have existed for thousands of years. Look at the 100 different interpretations of the Ramayana. The north goes by the *Ramcharitmanas*, which is a 15th century version of the original Ramayana by Valmiki. Myths will die if you don't reinterpret and localise," says the author.

Truth is not what you should be looking for in these interpretations, says Amish. Of his retelling of Shiva's story he says cryptically, "Only Lord Shiva knows the truth."

Ashok Banker, one of the pioneers of the mythology fiction wave, says, however, that his Mahabharata stories are taken from the original Sanskrit version by Vyasa. "I scrupulously adhere to the original text," he asserts.

Naturally, the writing of these fictionalized mythologies requires inconsiderate amount of research. Anand Neelakantan, who has been looking at the "villains" of our epics in a sympathetic light, reveals he reads the epics in translation and also other scholarly works on them. Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee admits to have read many versions of the Mahabharata for her book *Palace of Illusions*. "I chose the first person narrative since it allows readers to understand Draupadi's thoughts and feel close to her," says Banerjee, who is now keen to write a book on the "misunderstood Sita".

But not everyone thinks the new craze of modernizing our myriad myths is well justified. As Banker points out, "What the retellings have done is to over-simplify everything. Our original tales are much more complex, subtle and nuanced. Everything is not cause and effect, it's a number of things acting at the same time as well as free will at work."

However, to conclude, the opinions on the business of contemporary retellings of Indian Mythology are many but the publishing houses and the best selling authors have created an audience for themselves that is consuming their work by the hundreds every time a new book comes up.

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