SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE FUNCTION AND USE OF MYTH

Olivinho Gomes
Corresponding Member

1. Defining Myth

Myth has become one of the most pervasive cultural concepts of our irreverent time. A collective term that involves a kind of symbolic communication, it traces its origin to the Greek term 'mythos' denoting word in the sense of a decisive, final pronouncement, as different from 'logos', a word the validity of which needed to be demonstrated. (1)

Most definitions of myth have tended to hover on a high level of generality, its multiplex nature being the most striking note. There is, however, agreement on the common factor of narrative. 'Myth is narrative, irrational... and comes to mean any anonymously composed story telling of origins and destinies, the explanation a society offers its young of why the world is and why we do as we do, its pedagogic images of the nature and destiny of man' (Warren and Wellek). Or, 'Myth is to be definied as a complex of stories — some no doubt fact, and some fantasy — which, for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe of human life' (Alan Watts). (2)

'Myth is a story, usually of unknown origin and at least partially traditional, that ostensibly relates actual events to explain some practice, belief, institution or natural phenomenon, and that is especially associated with religious rites and beliefs. The word mythology denotes both the study of myth and the total corpus of myths in a particular culture

or religious tradition.' (3) The word 'myth' used as a substantive seems to be of relatively recent origin, for it appears in French only in 1811, in German in 1815, in English in 1830, while in Italian a little later in its equivalent version as 'favola' from Vico to Leopardi. (4)

2. Function of Myth

The authority of myth is implied rather than stated precisely and is accepted unquestionably as a frame of reference. It provides models for human conduct, institutions or universal conditions, and therein lies its overwhelming force. (5) Levi-Strauss recognized that mythological stories always exist as sets rather than isolates. Only when the total set of stories is taken into consideration the moral implications of myth are apprehended as a charter for social action, as Malinowski termed it. (6). For the latter emphasized that myth fulfilled common social functions in a variety of ways.

For Durkheim the function of myth was to bind a society, create a structure governed by rules and habits. For Sorel, myth is meant to direct energies and inspire action by embodying a dynamic movement of life. For Isaiah Berlin, a myth is composed of images that affect men not as reason does but as ferment of the soul, which creates enthusiasm and incites to action. For Roland Barthes myth abolishes the complexity of human action, gives it an elemental simplicity, organizes a world apparently without contradictions, creating a happy clarity. (7)

The main function of myth is that of explanation of the natural, social, cultural and biological facts. Along with this goes the function of narrative, and this has been of importance in many traditional systems of education. Justification or validation of a variety of myths answers questions about the nature and origins of ritual and cultic customs. Its inner meaning is useful to us because of the authoritative, and revelatory role they have for human existence. The mythical account that the killing of the girl Hainuwele in Ceram (Indonesia) brought life as man knows it,

into being, has an optimistic note since its events make life 'livable', validating it. (8) A significant theme that validates cultic proceedings is the necessity of death (e.g. the grain 'dies' to yield a harvest), the renewal of time and the meaningfulness of woman and sexuality in myth. (9)

Ruling and dynastic families in several civilizations have sought justification of their position in myth, claiming origin in the world of the gods or in heaven or from the sun or the moon, as in China, Egypt, Babylon, the Hittite Empire, Polynesia, the Inca Empire and India. Social classes also sought sanction in myth to reinforce their positional stature in the hierarchy, for myth expressed a perennial human need of an orderly universe and the place of man in it. Creation myths dealt with the enthronement of kings in some traditions like those of Fiji and ancient India. (10)

Myth also plays a significant role in healing the sick, as the incantations and prayers based on it are recited when an individual's life is in danger. Such a power bordering on the magical has been used by the priestly and poetic classes to hold sway in archaic and primitive civilizations. For that matter in a timeless civilization like India's the mythical themes and images are a 'given' source of all expression in art and culture and a constant presence overshadowing all creative effort. (11)

3. Use of Myth in Literature

It is the role of the imagination that has to be recognized as crucial to the transformation of the concept of myth into literary and other uses. The identification of myth is the art of grasping the essence of a situation, of putting one's finger on the heart of the matter, as it were. Though myth is one of the oldest elements of the human heritage, the nature of the concerns handled by it has varied from ancient to modern times. The very unapproachability of the content of myth has created the utility of the term and guaranteed its widespread usefulness. Social beliefs may complement or conflict with those of other kinds and hence the most

traditional sense in which a society may try to capture its own identity is through its great writers. Homer was the 'education of Hellas' and one may consider the role of Goethe in shaping the self-awareness of the German nation, that of Camoens in rebuilding the shattered nationhood of Portugal, that of Rabindranath Tagore in the Indian renaissance. (12)

The most ancient consideration of myth has been strangely very literal, as in Euhemerus's account of myth as muddled history, though Pindar and Virgil and the tragic poets found profound poetic uses for the relics of the past in their classic works. The myths of the cave of Atlantis or, of Er may involve features of traditional folklore and of free invention but they are ultimately used as a kind of extended metaphorical explanation. In this context the myths of our own society have quite a different quality for us from the myths of other people, for unless we share the assumptions of the narrator of myth, we will not be moved by the message inherent in it. For that gives myth its effective meaning. (13)

Myths of old became known by virtue of the fact that they became part of a written tradition, though in India we have had oral transmission. In the case of Greece, virtually all myths are 'literature' in the form in which they survived. The oldest of these are the epics of Homer, whose heroes and heroines are narrative rejuvenations of gods and goddesses in myth. As they became the basis of education in classical Greece, so the great epics of India, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, came to function as encyclopediae of knowledge and provided models for human existence. (14)

A study of the themes of the great literary classics of the world would show that they are rooted in myth, e.g. Dante's 'Divina Commedia', Racine's 'Phedre', Wagner's 'The Ring of the Nibelung', Melville's 'Moby Dick'. Dante's rich and complex use of myth, even to the extent of being borrowed from the ancient world, mingles with his personal beliefs. Shakespeare's "The Tempest", for instance lends itself to mythical interpretation, with fertility cults, death by water, ritual

reconciliation adding to its intensity. He might have used the myth of Troilus for his play of that name or taken only the story from it. Similarly for the myth of Racine's 'Phedre', which is obviously taken from Euripedes. Paul Valery has said that the statement 'fille de Minos et de Pasiphae' (daughter of Minos and Pasiphae) is not of a genealogical nature only but has the curious energy of evocation tht the old legend creates in that line, its distance giving added force to what it evokes. (15)

Contrast may perhaps be made between the case of a modern author and those of the past. For the latter myths were a more natural inheritance than to the former. With Racine or Milton, the mythological frame of reference is an accepted convention, and the rich deployment of classical mythology in 'Paradise Lost' can evoke a familiar response. In Dante, the terms of accommodation with the Christian scheme of things are worked out in conjunction with intense evocation of pagan gods, to indicate the recognition of an elemental, chronic force breaking through the official approval which their world required. (16)

The myth is transformed by a writer into a vehicle of psychological analysis. Yet the portrayals attempt to do justice to the life of the personified divinity and the notion of a simple rationalism will hardly help us with the 'Bacchae' or for that matter with the 'Hyppolytus' in which terrible and malignant deities appear in the Christian world of Racine. (17) Similarly, in the Portuguese poet Camoens's epic 'Os Lusiadas', it is the whole world of Greek mythology that is evoked and brought with gorgeous illustration to bear upon the work along with Christian theogony.

The attitude of the writer to the myths handled by him determines the shape taken by the work of literature in which they are employed. Myth is used intentionally as a means of deepening and enriching a poem or narrative. The simplest examples can be drawn from modern literature, where the author has acquired and consciously used materials of a traditional mythical kind. Yeats employs several consciously deployed forms of myth, existing at several levels, like personages from Irish

folklore or from the occult. His 'Sailing to Byzantium' has the city, the tree, the birth, the community of sages, the geometrical gyre, bits of mythical apparatus which have, for Northrop Frye, references to 'archetypes' which relate back to the 'comic vision (as an imaginative whole. (18)

'For any writer his myth is inevitably chosen in response to the spiritual condition of modern man, to the very fact of existence in a post-mythological age! (19) Thomas Mann's novel of the primitive tale of a man who sold his soul to the devil is similar to the rich and marvellous literature of the Faustus legend. Sometimes it is difficult to separate the myth from its more self-conscious literary versions, as often happens in modern Indian literature. The modern poet avails himself of myth for defining his own poetic aims and capturing for an immediate purpose what he regards as the propelling vitality of his source. (20)

In choosing his myth the modern writer is often eclectic or syncretic through the very fact of choice referring to the pressure of his own situation. Many modern versions of the classical myth, say of Antigone or Theseus, are not simplified models so much as a form on which to construct an intense and immediate story which uses its source more for its narrative shape than for any particular meaning it might be thought to have had. Gide's 'Oedipe' or 'Thesee' are attempts to remain within the form of the myth while using that heritage to their immediate purpose. While for Racine 'Thesee' was 'the eternal figure of jealous authority confronted by unintelligible revolt', for Gide he is 'a modern intellectual analysing his own identity'. In this conscious employment of the myth the writer imparts depth and intensity to his own creation in which he shows that he still belongs to his own age. (21)

Northrop Frye speaks of the dependence of literary works on the formal properties of their predecessors. The multiple incarnations of the Odysseus story in European literature in particular are examples of how it presents and imaginative liberation for the author who consciously

works on that raw material to fashion his own form according to his intent. This giving of form concerns the structural use of the Odyssey myth as a framework for Joyce's 'Ulysses'. Eliot saw in 'Ulysses's parallel use of the 'Odyssey' a manner of controlling and giving form and meaning to the vast 'panorama of futility and anarchy' that is the contemporary scene. (22)

Eliot's myths — or myth fragments as in 'The Wasteland' make some sort of spiritual claims as Lawrence's 'The Plummed Serpent' does in respect of their curative power. The Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa's 'Mensagem' posits the possibility of the return from a nebulous hiding-place of King Sebastian who had disappeared on the battlefild of Alcacer-Quibir in North Africa in a clash with the Moors, he being the rallying point of a strongly evocative myth that sustains the Portuguese people's touching nostalgia that goes by the name of 'saudosismo'. Thus myth appeals to individual modern writers in differing ways leading to the suggestion that it is a form of sensibility which is as varied as the individuals who share and draw from it. (23)

4. Writer as myth-maker

The poet makes the myth, says Sartre, and for him myth seems to stand for the extended imaginative dimensions that are given to literature by its creator. And this stand is adopted by some writers who are advocating a more experimental attitude towards all the genres of literature including the novel. Paul West speaks of the 'alert and attuned and imaginative writers of prose fiction who seek to create a plasmatic assortment' which may initiate myth. (24)

Yeats created some myths out of the assortment of tales from the Irish past, the Cuchulain tale being the central proposition among his myths. But to what extent does it impart the 'imaginative enlargement' to his work in this sphere, which is one of its most obvious aims, is a matter for debate. There is the case of another figure like Hanrahan, which he created,

and the Countess Cathleen and others, which stand as testimony to the enormous power that the self-created image has over the poet himself, as authentic and powerful as the traditional tale like Cuchulain. Yeats tried to create out of an unknown body of folklore a coherent myth and indirectly contributed to a national identity of feeling. (25)

There is a belief that through myth one touches upon the most primordial energies of man and captures elements of the 'unconscious and subrational qualities of the human situation.' The mythical elements that form a complex relationship are brought to bear on his literary and intellectual heritage when a writer fashions his work and may bring into being another myth in the process. Through a series of hints he throws, a suggestive identification is sought to be established between gods and his characters. One can see the myth beneath the surface of literature, plunging more deeply into the human situation and see the way literature intensifies, concentrates and reveals the human depths. (26)

5. Myth in Indian poetry today

Myth is deeply ingrained in the Indian consciousness and the domestic and public environment that fosters it through its folklore, feasts and festivals, worship and ritual. Itinerant preachers and enactment of dance and drama performances as well as architecture, sculpture and painting have kept myth always present in the minds of the Indian people. Myth is the living embodiment of their hopes and aspirations and their court of appeal in times of crises as well as joy, as the gods and goddesses form a living pantheon for them, apart from the characters in the epica and folklore.

As such the important challenge before Indian writers is to avail themselves to this rich fund of myths to play their imagination on and interpret them in the present context, with the weight of a multisecular tradition to assist them. That the Indian writer, particularly of the new poetry movement in Hindi, for instance, has taken advantage of myth to

make his trenchant comment on the problems of this age, in this country, is a tribute to his alertness, courage and his manifest involvement with the plight of his fellows.

For instance, in Dharamvir Bharati's 'Andha Yug', Ashwattama, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra are not traditional characters of the epic but symbols of the burning problems of modern life, the meaninglessness that hovers over our existence. The poet has focused on the sensitivities, preoccupations, aspirations and thoght of the modern age, and conjoined them with the mythical personages, to give added force to his statement. The changing values are reflected in the varied treatment given by various poets to a single myth, as pointed out earlier in the European context. For example, the fact of Kaikeyi's sending Rama to exile in the forest is a point of departure for various poetic treatment by poets from Tulsidas to Maithilisharan Gupta. (27)

The disintegration in people's lives brought about by the technological revolution, the dehumanisation that has set in with the hegemony of mechanisation and the invasion of the computer, the erosion of character in the post-independence leadership in the country, the plight of youth aimlessly stalking the land in quest of vanishingly scarce employment opportunities and becoming pawns in the game of violence and lawlessness have been mirrored in the situations in the Mahabharata and the Rama-Ravana struggle in the Ramayana and th poet has given expression to these issues in a modern garb with great skill. In 'Astitv ke ghere mein' Kunwar Narain is at his analytical best while delving into the inner disintegration of today's man in India. Divik Ramesh has also dealt with this issue in his 'ek puranik prasang' in the collection 'Raste ke bich' putting Krishna himself in the dock while expatiating on the onslaught on the values of righteousness, justice, truth, owing to the extraordinary importance attached to victory. (28)

The inner wounds that afflict mankind find extreme expression in 'ek kantt vishpaii' of Dushyant Kumar who feels that a person becomes

indifferent to even his near and dear ones in his quest for personal advancement. In 'Sanshai ki ek rat' Naresh Mehta has commented on the dehumanisation process that informs the individualism of modern man as he does at length in his 'Mahaprasthn' on the demeaning aspects of human relationships where one experiences intense meaninglessness. (29)

The opportunistic alliances of parties coming forth on the basis of caste, class and religion, in utter disregard to the secularistic objectives of the country, are also exposed in this poetry. The alienation of man also finds echoes in 'Mahaprasthan' as well as in 'Sanshai ki ek rat', alienation from one's own self, social values and professional activities, which is a galling experience, in which myth is invoked to heighten that consciousness. Like Mehta other poets of the new poetry movement in Hindi have opposed the corrupting tendencies of the powers that be to beguilt leaders of public opinion while they go about their hideous practices. (30)

In my part of the country, that is Goa, Konkani poetry of the post-liberation period has been increasingly drawing inspiration from the Indian mythical fountain, as the process of re-integration with the motherland takes on added momentum. The religious syncretism operating within the Hindu-Christian society of Goa for centuries despite the genocidal onslaught on the culture, has spawned a variety of myth which is deeply embedded in the folk ethos. Glimpses of this rich lore can be had from the poetry of R. V. Pandit, Pandurang Bhangi, Manohar Sardessai, Prakash Padgaonkar and Ramesh Veluskar, for example. Padgaonkar's 'Hang Monis Ashvatthamo' (I am that man, Ashvattaman) shows obsessive identification with Ashvatthaman, depicting the plight of modern man who, in spite of his pleasure, power and pelf, continues to be lonely and afflicted with some sorrow or the other that makes his life miserable. Among poets of the earlier generations who wrote in Portuguese on predominantly Indian themes, is the great Goan poet, Paulino Dias, who draws heavily on Indian myth in his poem of epic proportions that is 'No Pais de Indra' (In the land of Indra), among others.

6. Myth in the performing arts

Besides literature myth has been used extensively in the performing arts like the drama, dance and music. As a matter of fact, myth constitutes the principal root of drama, which is evident in the Indian situation as well as in the tragedies of classical Greece. The festival of Dionysus organized by the Greek city-states had performances of drama based on mythological themes and playwrights like Aeschylus took up themes from tribal cults and presented them in the manner of myth, relating them to the contemporary community as a whole, the citizens making up the chorus, the crucial part of early Greek tragedy. (31). The close linkage between myth and ritual gave rise to drama in the East, particularly in India, which continued to rely on myth to enhance its horizons. The Ṣanskrit plays and even modern ones like 'Hayawadan' and 'Tughlak' of Girish Karnad and Uday Bhembro's 'Karnaparva' in Konkani, illustrate this point. Elsewhere in the Far East too, dramatic presentations like the Japanese NO plays and the Javanese 'wayang' are similarly rooted in and take inspiration from myth, to further the dramatists's ends. (32)

Dance has been serving as an accompaniment to drama in the expression of myth, particularly that of Nataraja as the central figure in the Indian artistic manifestation, and ritual too gives it prominence that is difficult for many people to believe in the West today. For modern secularisation has in the western world done away with much of the ritual behaviour. There is, however, interest in ballet and increasing revival in folk-dancing as new forms of mythic expression. (33) But in India this long-standing tradition is very much alive and what is more, thriving, which is a positive sign of the prodding place of myth in our rich heritage of classical dance.

Music in its primary function of production of rythm resembles dance and thereby myth in its primordial essence. In many traditions myth is regarded as being of a creative character and hence mythical in

itself and conducive to intensifying the creative act. Many of the great musical masterpieces of the world which combined elements from the other arts like drama and poetry, sought inspiration in myth. Bach's 'Phoebus and Pan' is a secular dramatic cantata with polyphonic music, apart from his oratorios, concertos and symphonies which partake of a similar source. Beethoven's sonates, concertos and operas like 'Fidelio' and Wagner's operas like 'The Ring of the Nibelung', 'Tanhauser' and 'Lohengrin' which unified elements of music, musical effects. Similarly Mozart's 'Don Giovanni' and 'The Magic Flute' and Gluck's 'Orfeo ed Euridice' and 'Echo et Narcisse'. (34) While in the West today mythical themes survive only in the form of opera and oratorios, in Indian music myth is very much on centre stage though it has not been able to extend its horizons to the extent desired by moving out of its conservative mould, in emulation of the models, which should not be out of reach of our dramatists and musicians if they join hands towards that objective.

7. Myth in modern mass media

Modern means of communication such as radio, television and film have exploited religious symbolism and myth for their purpose. But equally striking is the fact that they have provided channels for old mythological themes to unfold themselves with greater vigour. Communications has become the most powerful means of conveying information and supplying entertainment for passive listeners and viewers who are held in a captive audience for the media and hold their attention with firmer grip than any religious ceremonies did before. Hence their power of intense suggestion and their instant impact on the audio-visual plane has increased the receptivity and awareness of myth among the people.

The religious mythology that was in the process of being discarded has thanks to the electronic media come all the more alive and filled our consciousness with greater force than any time before. Myth has become so pervasive and understood and even appreciated by a larger audience straddling across religious divisions that it holds the audience in a spell akin

to the hypnotic. The addiction to myth has to be observed to be believed.

Other mythological types have surfaced in the modern age, of ancient and classical myth, who are akin to the heroes and heroines of ancient and classical myth, such as sports heroes, movie stars, astronauts and other celebrities. Whatever may be the details or the order of popularity of such mythemic heroes, the modern audience, like all its predecessors, looks for models by which all things can be measured and emulated assiduously. (35).

8. Literary use of myth as a cure

Richard Chase speaks of the quest or search for myth that underlies the elaboration of the Quetzalcoatl myth in Lawrence's 'The Plumed Serpent' in the context of the suggestion that myth can cure. Many authors have sought to use myth as an energising or ordering principle, and to appeal to the imagination through it, to suggest a validity which is larely controlled by the context which a work of art would provide. A more literal sense of the curative aspects of myth is suggested in Mann's 'The Magic Mountain', though it is well nigh difficult to separate the myth from the total design of the work except in Hans Castorp's dream in the snow where a series of literal mythological images represents one of the most intensely concentrated moments in the passage towards self-knowledge, enabling him to give form to an internal process. (36)

9. Challenges ahead for the Indian writer

Tremendous developments are taking place all over the world at a vertiginous pace and we in India cannot be immune to them, as they affect our lives in all spheres. While technology hurtles forward at breakneck speed, man has not been keeping abreast of the changes brought about by it but is chained to his old prejudices, inhibitions and cultural hang-ups. It is true that age-old superstitions and barriers are in the process of being thrown overboard but other problems are staring us in the face

which need to be tackled courageously. The writer can put the medium of myth to the service of his fellowmen in the country and help transform them into a forward-looking, integrated community, untrammelled by the fetters that bound the forebears.

While it is felt that the benefits of development should reach the people there are a whole lot of middlemen and touts who emasculate them and do not allow them to percolate down to the lowest level, with the result that the poor have remained where they were. Corruption has increased to unimaginable levels to the extent of being almost institutionalised and the common man groans under its heavy yoke. The Indian writer has to perform the stellar role of arousing the consciousness of the people to the imbalances and contradictions in our society, exposing injustice and corruption in whatever form exists at any level, so that the common man in this country can breathe freely and according to the law of the land which should have universal application without fear or favour.

The symbols of contemporary men are mirrored in our myth which should be drawn to our aid in new manifestations, mythological characters taking on colours, forms and force relevant to the Indian society of our day, drawing parallels from them and making them abundantly relevant to the present, with social awareness of the problems facing it, with a view to right the wrongs that are perpetrated in the name of development. The Indian writer is already taking up this challenge to a certain extent, as has been seen from a glimpse of Hindi and Konkani poetry. Much more needs to be done if we, Indian writers, are to fulfill our role as the vocal conscience of our suffering humanity by putting our talents to the service of our people who have great expectations from us. I am sure we will not fail them.

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