Echoes Across Time: Comparative Narrative Elements and Archetypes in Greek and Indian Mythology

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Abstract: The following paper illustrates the various resemblances in the narrative elements and discourse of Indian and Greek mythologies. With a Jungian understanding of the psychoanalytical importance of myths and its archetypes, the paper will dive deep into the aforementioned mythologies and fish out some interesting parallels between the plot, characters, conflict, setting and theme of the two. The paper will discuss how the underlying tone of various myths and mythical characters is the same and how despite the different language the essence of the mythologies remains the same. Monica Fludernik's essay- "The Structure of Narrative" would be used to understand the narrative discourse, structure and elements of the myths. An endeavor to perform a comparative analysis of the mythological epics- Homer's *Iliad* and Valmiki's *Ramayana* would be made. The paper would also attempt to explore the process of stories transcending into history and history transcending into mythology. Rahul Sankrityayan's *Volga Se Ganga* and the Parry-Lord theory will be used to understand the significance of the similarities between these mythologies and the possibility of a combined narrative and a collective narrator in context of migration and orature.

Index Terms - **archetypes, epic, gods, history, orality, narrative, narrative discourse, narrative elements, narrator, myth, mythology, storytelling.**

INTRODUCTION

Mythology can be described as a body of interconnected myths, or stories, told by a specific cultural group to explain the world consistent with people's experience of the world in which they live. The word "myth" is derived from the ancient Greek word meaning "story" or "plot," and was applied to stories sacred and secular, invented and true. Myths usually start as sacred stories that "offer supernatural explanations for the creation of the world . . . and humanity, as well as for death, judgment, and the afterlife" ("Myth" 284). A mythology or belief system often concerns supernatural beings/powers of a culture, provides a rationale for a culture's religion and practices, and reflects how people relate to each other in everyday life. Creation or origin myths explain how the world came to be in its present form, and often position "the cultural group telling the myth" as the first people or the "true" people ("Myth" 284). Such sacred stories, or narratives, concern where a people and the things of their world come from, why they are here, where they are going. Myths and mythology express a culture's worldview: that is, a people's conceptions and assumptions about humankind's place in nature and the universe, and the limits and workings of the natural and spiritual world.

JUNGIAN ARCHETYPES AND MYTHOLOGY

According to psychiatrist Carl Jung, myth is a necessary aspect of the human psyche which needs to find meaning & order in the world. The concept of something greater and more powerful than one's self gives one the hope of direction and protection in an uncertain world. 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." Jung likewise tried to understand the psychology behind world myths. Jung asserted that all humans share certain innate unconscious psychological forces,

which he called *archetypes*. He believed similarities between the myths of different cultures reveals the existence of these universal archetypes. Jung developed depth psychology, proposing that humankind has a "collective unconscious," or racial memory in which archetypes, or "primordial images," survive as a kind of "psychic residue" of our ancestors' repeated patterns of experience. These archetypes are expressed in myths, religion, dreams, private fantasies, as well as in works of literature.

Archetypes can be defined as a set of universal and elemental mental forms or patterns—e.g. recurring narrative plots, patterns of action, character types, images—found in a wide variety of the world's literary and oral traditions, myths, dreams, and ritualized modes of social behaviour.

UNIVERSAL ARCHETYPES IN GREEK AND INDIAN MYTHOLOGY

The stories which make up the corpus of ancient mythology served the same purpose for the people of the time as the stories from accepted scripture do for people today: they explained, comforted, and directed an audience and, further, provided a sense of unity, cohesion, and protection to a community of like-minded believers. While looking at these stories whether hearing them or reading them, one is sure to be perplexed by the amount of similarities across these stories which ultimately build the culture, tradition and religion of the region. This paper would focus majorly on the similarities in the narrative elements of the myths, majorly Indian and Greek. Narrative elements are the parts of a story that sculpt the entire narrative of the work. Setting, plot, characterization, theme, foreshadowing, the point of view and the conflicts within the plot contribute significantly to the storyline.

Humans have always been fascinated with stories, listening, telling and retelling them across generations. Over time these stories become the history of a particular group of people and in time this history becomes myth for the generations to come. If we understand and debunk the myths of a particular region in context with another region, we can see astonishing similarities in their narrative elements. These myths share common archetypes, plot and conflict of characters.

PARALLELS BETWEEN GREEK AND INDIAN GODS

The most astonishing similarity between Greek and Indian mythology is how the have Gods for everything encompassing a range of variety from death, netherworld, harvest, music to fortune, fate, wine, war, love, beauty, fertility. Saraswati, the Goddess of music and learning is equivalent to the Greek Goddess of music, skills and crafts, Athena. Annapurna Devi has her counterpart as Demeter in Greek mythology. Yama and Thanatos share striking similarities in their powers and purpose. They may share different names but the Gods, Goddesses and deities found across these mythologies very often share the same purpose. Even the trinity of Brahma (creator), Vishnu (preserver) and Shiva (destroyer) can be compared the Greek trinity of Zeus (ruler of the heavens and creator of Humans), Poseidon (ruler of the seas) and Hades (ruler of the Netherworld and the dead).

INDRA AND ZEUS: KINGS OF GODS WITH MORTAL FLAWS

The Vedic God of thunder, Indra bears quite the resemblance with the Greek king of Gods, Zeus. Lightning and thunder are their powers. Both are revered as King of Gods and both have their residence in the high mountains of Meru and Olympia. They appear across many myths in Indian and Greek context. Zeus and Indra are not the perfect force of goodness in their respective myths, they tend to cause more trouble than they fix. However, they share a place of power and respect among the Gods along with love for their human children.

Though they are the King of Gods, they share some of the flaws of a mortal human being, they both get jealous, act impulsively and are ruled by their primal desires. Both Indra and Zeus have been read as lustful Gods with a questionable moral compass at times. Zeus was married to Hera, the goddess of marriage, women, childbirth, heirs, kings and empires, and was known to be quite adulterous in his marriage and it was his infidelities that drove Hera mad with jealousy and vengefulness. In the myth of Hercules, Zeus is infatuated by the youth and beauty of Alcmene and as she was happily married to Amphitryon Zeus knew seduction would be lost on the righteous woman. With no means to an end Zeus resolved to trickery and disguised himself as her husband, Amphitryon and slept with Alcmene, thus fathering the legendary demi-god Hercules. A not so similar but still reminiscent incident can be found in the mythological epic of *Ramayana* where Indra,

driven mad by his lust for Ahilya, the wife of Sage Gautama Maharishi ended up disguising himself as the Sage to fulfil his mortal desires. In both these myths we can find the narrative elements to be quite strikingly the same. The plot revolves around powerful omnipotent Gods desiring something which is unattainable, a married woman, letting their desires get the best of them and how even they are not spared from the sin of lust and coveting. The Gods in these myths are characterized almost identically, not the righteous energy of truth and morality but mere flawed creatures allowing their primal desires to rule their conscience and morality, their conflict is also internal within the inner self, between morality and lust and the end result of this conflict is also the same, the Kings of Gods bowing to innate mortal nature and indulging in the evil.

HERMES AND NARADA: MESSENGERS OF THE GODS

Hermes, a deity in Ancient Greek religion and mythology, the son of Zeus and Maia. Considered the Herald of Gods is the protector of human heralds, travelers, thieves, merchants, and orators. He is able to move quickly between the world of divine, underworld and the human world aided by his winged sandals. In myth he is known as the emissary and messenger of Gods and is often regarded as the "divine trickster". He is known to appear across various myths, even in the myth of Hercules where he aided the demi-god by giving him a sword when he finished his education and also assisted Perseus by lending him his winged sandals. Narada, the son of Braham and Saraswati, a Vedic sage famous in Hindu traditions as a travelling musician and storyteller, who carries news and enlightening wisdom. He appears in a number of Hindu texts, including the *Ramayana, Mahabharata* and *Puranas*. Like Hermes, Narada too is the son of a powerful God and can travel the Trilok (heaven, mortal realm and underworld) freely where he serves as messenger of the Gods. Narada and Hermes are similar in their purpose and functionality, they also share a lot of similar characteristic traits both are known to gossip and often trick and mislead people with their words. At times, they both can be cunning and shrewd and ultimately, they are loyal towards the Gods.

ACHILLES AND KARNA: TRAGIC HEROES OF WAR

Achilles, a hero of the Trojan war, the bravest of all Greek warriors, a demi-god and the central character in Homer's *Iliad* is comparable with the tragic hero, Karna who was the son of Surya and Kunti, also a demi-god and one of the bravest heroes in the Vyasa's *Mahabharat*. They both had impenetrable armors, they were both advised not to go to the war by their mothers and it was their death which in a way put an end to the battle. They share similar characterization in their respective epics as well, they are both portrayed as tragic heroes and their death is inevitable in the course of the war. Achilles's heel was his hamartia and Karna's curse of dying by getting the wheel of chariot stuck in mud in the battlefield was his. They did not receive the validation they deserved as true heroes during their lifetime and they both were deserted by their respective mothers. These parallels in the narrative elements of their stories suggest similar archetypes for tragic characters in both mythologies.

ICARUS AND SAMPATI: LESSONS IN HUBRIS

Another very interesting example of sharing similar plot and characterization across myths is that of Icarus and Sampati. Their myths have striking similitude in their plot, conflict, characterization and theme. Icarus was the son of the famous craftsman Daedalus, he creator of the Labyrinth. Icarus and his father attempt to escape from Crete by means of wings that his father constructed from feathers and wax. His father warned him not to fly too low or too high but Icarus cossetted in his vanity which ultimately led to his demise. Sampati on the other hand appears in Vedic scriptures as the elder son of Aruṇa and a brother of Jatayu. He has the form of a vulture. As children Jatayu and Sampati used to compete as to who could fly higher in nilmatha and in one such instance Jatayu flew too close to the Sun and Sampati in an attempt to save his brother himself got burnt by the flames of the Sun. Their stories include characters who share the same sin, *hubris,* the sin of pride. The plot of their story is also alike, the climax being flying too close to the Sun and getting hurt, while Icarus drowns in the Sea and perishes, Sampati with burnt feathers and a disfigured physique lives on as a cautionary tale of losing to one's pride. Their tales embody the same theme of indulging in vanity and self-importance and they mutually follow a similar end.

PARALLELS BETWEEN THE ILIAD AND THE RAMAYANA

The epics *Ramayana* by Valmiki and *Iliad* by Homer though written in different regions and different timelines share quite a few archetypes and narrative elements and this paper would not be the first to point them out and ponder over their significance. Both epics deal with the noble notion of a righteous few going against great evil which is significantly more powerful, morality and conscience are also common archetypes of the epics. The divine can also be seen intervening in the mortal realms and choosing sides in a battle of men which was fought for a woman. The central plot of both the epics being two united brothers crossing the sea to reunite one of the brothers with his missing wife. The brothers being Rama and Lakshmana in Indian context and Agamemnon and Menelaus in the Greek epic and the wife being Sita and Helen, both princesses of exquisite and flawless beauty. This beauty of a wife is taken away by the antagonist, Ravana and Paris to a foreign prosperous land across the sea, Lanka and Troy. The antagonist of the epic also has a righteous brother back in their Kingdom, Hector in Troy and Vibhishana in Lanka. The ultimate outcome of both these wars is the plundering and total destruction of the glorious kingdom across the sea. The Greek warriors looted and plundered Troy after ransacking the city hidden in a wooden horse and in *Ramayana* Hanuman with the end of his long tail on fire, burnt the entire golden kingdom of Lanka. Another commonality between these epics is that the protagonists ultimately resolve to trickery in defeating the antagonist, Vibhishana revealed Ravana's weakness the pot of elixir at his navel without which it was almost impossible for Rama to kill him and in the Trojan war the Greeks penetrate the city walls by hiding in a wooden horse which was meant as an offering for the Gods. Apart from the plot, the geographical setting of the epics bears quite the resemblance, the antagonists belong to faraway lands which is separated from the land by a vast waterbody and one of the hurdles in the protagonists' mission is crossing this geographical barrier to get their woman back and avenge her honor. In *Ramayana* Rama prays to the God of Seas and ocean for three continuous days after which with his blessing and boon Rama's army builds a bridge across the ocean to cross the water and reach Lanka whereas in *Iliad* Menelaus asks his brother Agamemnon for ships and together uniting the various tribes of Greece they form a huge naval fleet thus lunching an attack of massive scale.

The reason why the readers and listeners of these epics empathize with Rama-Lakshmana and Agamemnon-Menelaus is because these characters belong to the nation and region of the audience for whom the epic was crafted for. Hector is a noble and brave character in the epic but he is not the hero of the epic because he is not Greek, he is a foreigner an alien creature who transgressed the bounds of *xenia* (guest-friendship) by abducting his host's wife, Helen. Similarly the epic of *Ramayana* would have a completely different impact if its readership sided with Ravana, a loving brother who avenged his sister's honor by abducting the wife of the man who insulted his sister but instead the audience treats Ravana as the villain as he belongs to a foreign land and his ideas and philosophy is not complacent with that of the protagonists with whom the audience has a bond majorly due to sharing the same nation. Even so much so that Ravana and his kingdom is said to be of Rakshasa (demon) in nature due to his foreign and alien ways.

The conflict of these characters in both the epics is also similar, the entire animosity is due to the abduction of a wife and two royal brothers' duo going against each other in a legendary war the victory of which is ultimately achieved through deception. The foreign prosperous kingdom which was attacked upon ends up plundered and destructed. Though there are other various discrepancies in the epics but these similarities in the narrative elements and the shared archetypes are just too much to simply ignore. One is bound to ponder upon their implications and wonder about the idea of a collective narrative which ultimately travelled and transgressed in the many formats we see now as Valmiki's *Ramayana* is not the only epic about Rama's conquest in Indian mythology. There are multiple versions of this epic in the Indian subcontinent itself.

FATE VS. FREE WILL: KRISHNA AND OEDIPUS

The story of Krishna and his birth starts with Devaki and Vasudeva's elaborate wedding which was organized by Devaki's brother Kansa who loved her very dearly but just as Devaki was getting on the chariot to leave her brother's home and start her married life there was an Aakashvanni, a prophecy from the sky which stated that the sister which Kansa is wedding off so lovingly, it would be her seventh son who would kill him and put an end to his reign of torture and terror. Hearing this Kansa imprisoned both Devaki and Vasudeva in the dungeons of his palace where he planned to murder each kid Devaki bore. Such prophesizing oracles can be very easily found across Greek mythologies. Oedipus who was a mythical Greek king of Thebes, a tragic hero in Greek mythology. He was born to the king and queen of Thebes, Laius and Jocasta. The Oracle of Apollo at Delphi had prophesized that any son born to Laius would kill him and marry Jocasta. In

an attempt to thwart this prophecy, when Jocasta bore him Oedipus, he pierced the ankles of the child together so he couldn't crawl and asked a shepherd to leave him on the mountain side so that he would die. In both these myths we can see a visible attempt on the part of Kansa and Laius to escape from fate and predestination with their free will and actions. This struggle between free will and predestination is a very prominent archetype found in the narrative of Greek and Indian mythology. But despite their efforts and free will, whatever these characters do only serves to aid the fulfilment of the prophecy. Oedipus does murder his father and marries his own mother and Krishna does end up killing his own uncle. Hence in the vast design of fate and destiny human counteractions seldom provide to create any friction. Whatever is destined to happen will happen, an underlying subplot of both Greek and Indian mythologies.

CONCLUSION: A SHARED NARRATIVE TRADITION

After pondering over all these examples which are just an iota of glimpse into these mythologies, one is sure to muse over its insinuations and implications. Rahul Sankrityayan in his fiction novel *Volga se Ganga (1943)* compiles a series of imaginary stories across the history of human evolution. Wikipedia describes his work as "These stories collectively trace the migration of Aryans from the steppes of the Eurasia to regions around the Volga river; then their movements across the Hindukush and the Himalayas and the sub-Himalayan regions; and their spread to the Indo-Gangetic plains of the subcontinent of India." The theory behind his work being that Aryans started their civilization in Central Eurasia and due to depleting resources, some of them migrated towards Asia. Though they didn't bring a lot of luggage with them one thing that they bought in abundance was stories, these stories are deal with the ancestors and forefathers of the community and in no time these stories transcend into history and as time moves on and memory blurs history becomes myth for the next generations. But with the countless similarities in the narrative of Greek and Indian mythology one is sure to deliberate the possibility of a collective narrator. Monica Fludernik in her essay, "The Structure of Narrative" talks about this

In narratives with a prominent narrator figure, the narrative discourse simulates the situation of a storyteller telling the story to his/her listeners. Sometimes, however, this layer of the narrative structure may not be immediately obvious, and so the reader has the impression that there is no narrator at all.

The absence of a narrator figure in mythologies proposes a similar problem but this absence does not implicate that there never was a narrator. The notion of the presence of a collective narrator and a collective conscious in a very distant past does not seem that far fetched when one compares the narrative of these myths. The way that these myths have travelled and transgressed, their words and the language have changed but the underlying narrative elements and archetypes are quite alike in more ways than one.

Milman Parry (1902–1935) and his student Albert Lord (1912–1991) discovered and studied what they called the oral-formulaic method of oral epic singers in the Balkans. Parry used this study to ask the age-old question of "who was Homer?" in their research they proposed a theory which roughly paraphrased states that the epics written by Homer were not his original work but instead a compilation of oral poetry that had been passed down for ages. This theory is used to study various ancient epics, according to which epics are neither a work of fiction nor documentation instead they are compilation of oral poetry that have been around for a long time. Given this hypothesis and the theory of migration, the idea of combined narrative and collective narrator sure seems rational. Sparsity of resources led people to migrate which though dispersed people and changed their language and geographical setting but the stories and oral tradition they carried with themselves showcased itself in their diverse mythologies as they all share the same narrative discourse.

The striking similarities between Greek and Indian mythology suggest the existence of shared narrative structures and archetypal characters that transcend cultural and geographical boundaries. From gods and heroes to themes of fate, morality, and deception, both traditions exhibit a profound connection in the way they shape their mythic storytelling. The presence of common archetypes—such as the trickster messenger (Hermes and Narada), the tragic hero (Achilles and Karna), and the omnipotent yet flawed god (Zeus and Indra)—demonstrates how myths serve as cultural blueprints, reflecting human psychology and collective experiences.

These parallels raise intriguing questions about the origins and evolution of mythology. Did these stories emerge independently due to universal human concerns, or were they influenced by historical interactions and migrations, as suggested by Rahul Sankrityayan's *Volga se Ganga*? Regardless of their genesis, the similarities in plot structures, character conflicts, and thematic concerns reinforce the idea that mythology functions as a vessel for human expression, preserving and transmitting cultural values across generations. By analyzing these myths side by side, we not only deepen our understanding of these ancient civilizations but also recognize the shared storytelling instincts that unite humanity across time and space.

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