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Rewriting of Hindu Mythology in Popular Indian English Novels

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Mythology is a set of mythological stories, especially one belonging to a particular religious or cultural tradition. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, the term 'mythology' is defined as "a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives" (Abrams & Harpham 230). However, myth plays an important role as the foundation of many societies and cultures. It reflects the traditions, beliefs, customs, etc. of a society. Devdutt Pattanaik defines myth as "a cultural construct, a common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together...if the myth is an idea, mythology is the vehicle of that idea" (Pattanaik xvi). Myth and mythology are relevant for the development of a community. It has been the source of inspiration for artists and writers all over the world and now myth has emerged as one of the popular genres in literary fiction as well as in non-fiction writings. In India, such mythological stories are largely found in Hindu religious texts, particularly in two great epics: *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. These two great epics are not only considered as religious texts but as social treatises also. It still has a tremendous influence on Indian life and culture. These two epics have been considered the most widely adapted works in literature.

Susan Visvanathan, a Professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University states that mythology is something that never dies; rather it resurfaces with new interests. Before the rise of the printing press, mythological stories had been passed down from generation to generation in the oral tradition. Now in the age of modern technology, these stories have been passing through different mediums including printed texts, movies, television shows, cartoons, computer games, music, etc. These allow the ancient stories to move faster and reach more people than ever before. However, the different themes in the mythical stories have fascinated the readers and authors over generations. Rewriting mythology in a new contemporary way is one of the popular trends in contemporary writings in India. The old stories are taking a new shape and blending in with the modern writings in the contemporary period. Modern writers have taken different approaches to those stories; they have re-interpreted those traditional mythological stories from completely new perspectives subverting the rigidity of the original stories. Dr. Pradnyashailee Sawai in *The Context* states that “pure myth can be retold in any language, any style and in any medium without losing its identity...it is his understanding that the reinterpretation of the tales is the way in which the writers tell us what they exactly feel about that particular story or the narrative” (qtd. in Kulkarni 714). Therefore, modern writers have retold the old stories without changing the essence of the original stories, but style and approach have been changed which are unique to the times. They have begun to experiment with form and narrative. They do not treat those stories as very sacrosanct. Instead, they have interpreted the stories creatively, and have “analyzed, dissected, delve into ambiguous areas and derived meanings are corroborated by discussions and dialogues of readers, thinkers, and academicians” (Rathi). The stories are reinterpreted in a way that makes the characters less godly and more human. New retellings have generated a lot of interest and have been very popular with the Indian readers of today. In the words of S. R. Sinha, such writings about Indian mythology and legends have “set the book market on fire” (Sinha 130). D.W. Mohamed and Donia Gamila also write that:

Borrowing a certain tale or character from ancient mythologies, then molding them into a new narrative that appeals to modern day audience, does not only heighten the popularity of mythology, but also contributes in popularizing those certain works of literature. (Mohamed & Gamila 1)

Writers like Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelakantan, Devdutt Pattanaik, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane have gained a lot of fame because of their literary works involving Indian myths. In her article titled, “Best-Selling Myths”, Reena Singh states that mythological fiction is one of the new big money-spinners in the book publishing industry in India and across the world and as the reasons, she writes:

Besides philosophical, spiritual and moral insights, stuff that mythological accounts are renowned for, these new stories take liberties with the plot, often placing characters in a contemporary context. What’s more, all the deep insight is no longer of the kind that sits heavy on your mind; they are reader-friendly and peppered with current jargon. (Reena Singh)

Writers have been experimenting with the mythological genre by blending it with the other modes of writings also. According to S. Kulkarni, writers have used Indian epics as “their base stories in Indian fantasy fiction” and given it “prime importance completely abstaining from the popular fantasies of the west, like ‘Harry Potter’ or ‘The Lord of the Rings’” (Kulkarni 714). With the new experimentation, they have modernized the Indian myth and given it a new outlook which draws the attention of modern minds. Thus, these writers have contributed a lot in popularizing and invigorating Indian culture and history amongst young Indian readers who had almost forgotten their rich heritage of mythology and culture and showed their interest in the western one. As S. R. Sinha writes,

The young Indian of today is generally not very aware of her rich heritage of mythology. She has a very vague, often hazy idea of her own mythology. On the other hand, western myths and legends abound in the short stories, poems and novels that children read while growing up. So young readers of today may be familiar with stories of Robin hood, King Arthur and his Roundtable, vampires, Greek legends or witches and wizards, but may not be fully cognizant with stories from the Mahabharata and Ramayana. (Sinha 132)

Therefore, when new mythological books, especially fiction have started to enter the literary market, the average Indian readers have realized their lack of knowledge about their own myths and culture, and therefore, these books have received the widespread appeal. Now mythological fiction has dominated the field of contemporary fiction in India. Moreover, there can be seen the resurgence of mythology in children's literature too. Many writers have written mythological stories for children to provide a profound knowledge of mythology to children in a way that makes reading enjoyable and a fun-filled experience for them. M Venkatesh, owner of Eureka, a children's bookstore in Delhi says that "there is a demand for Indian authors writing for children, especially in the 7-11 age group" (qtd. in Preeti Singh). The stories of Krishna, Hanuman, Chhota Bheem, etc. have been rewritten for the children with whom they can relate. Hence, these mythological fiction writers are more accessible to readers of all ages, especially to young readers. Asha Krishna has opined that instead of churning out other classics which were "hard reads", the modern mythological books have now "appealed to mass readers who can now enjoy a story that is at once familiar yet compelling" (Krishna). The translations of the English mythological books into multiple Indian languages such as Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, etc. have a greater reach to the non-English readers of India. In one of his interviews with Swetha Amit, Amish Tripathi said that "regional languages are the key to reaching the masses", which constitute a considerable portion of the mass market (Tripathi). According to him, most publishers restrict themselves to the English language only for which they lose out on a large market comprising of non-English readers. But after the translations of the books, readers have now been able to access translated versions of the home-grown English writers. As a result, it has not only increased the writer's audience and expanded the sales of their books, but also offered a larger variety to non-English readers. India readers already know or hear the mythological stories, but the new retellings from new perspectives introduce the readers to new characters and relatable events and change their perspective according to the writer and, give wings to their imagination as well. Moreover, it also gives the readers liberty to read the story according to their own perspectives. Regarding the popularity of mythological fiction, Trisha Das, writer of *The Mahabharata Re-imagined* also comments: "It's popular with writers because it's also popular with the readers. We've all grown up with these stories, and now we're telling them in our own way" (qtd. in Srivastava).

One of the early trendsetters in modern mythological writing is Ashok K. Banker, whose bestselling eight-volume Ramayana Series, published in 2003 has been considered as the starting of the trend of successful retellings of Indian mythological epics. Along with the international acclaim received by Banker, his books became commercially successful which indicates the interest of the people in the mythical past. According to data, his books have sold over 2 million copies and have been published in 16 languages in 58 countries. In his series, Banker has rewritten the stories of the Ramayana from the modern perspective. In one of his interviews regarding the success of the Ramayana Series, Banker says that his aim of rewriting those stories “was to subvert Brahmanical fundamentalism, as well as portray the (characters) as flesh-and-blood human beings rather than inscrutable gods [and] the unexpected success of the series shows that millions of readers worldwide were eager to know these Indian stories if told in a modern tone” (Banker). Followed the tradition started by Banker, numerous books including novels, plays, poetry based on mythology have been published in India. Amish Tripathi’s Shiva Trilogy is one of the most popular retellings of Lord Shiva, which includes three novels: *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011), and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013). A report reveals that this trilogy has collectively sold over 2.5 million copies which is more than Banker’s Ramayana Series and earns the distinction of being the fastest-selling series in the history of Indian publishing. Moreover, the books have been translated into multiple languages including both regional and international languages. This series of three novels became popular basically because in his books, Amish Tripathi has presented Lord Shiva from a different perspective; he is portrayed not as a God but as a mortal who is treated like a God. He has been described as a man, a fearsome warrior, a consummate dancer, a leader, and a true lover in the series. What makes the character of Shiva more realistic is that he has been shown smoking and at times even uttering few bad words in anger. Moreover, the author has used the contemporary style of narrative and gives a scientific explanation for everything in his books which makes them more interesting and worth reading. Poile Sengupta in her play “Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni” has used the fantasy mode by bringing the character of Surpanakha from the *Ramayana* and Shakuni from the *Mahabharata* together in the same plot. She has situated them in a post-modern context making an airport the setting of the play. This type of newness in mythological themes always astonishes the readers.

Thus, contemporary mythological fiction authors have demythologized the myth in their works by not just eliminating it, but by extricating its true, symbolic meaning. They depict the symbolic representation of the past in their writings. According to Robert Segal, when myth is demythologized, then it

...ceases to be about the world and turns out to be about human experience of the world. Demythologized, myth ceases to be an explanation at all and becomes an expression, an expression of what it 'feels' like to live in the world. Myth ceases to be merely primitive and becomes universal. It ceases to be false and becomes true.

It depicts the human condition. (Segal 48)

When a story depicts the human condition, then the readers can easily relate to it. Therefore, modern mythological fiction writers have subverted the Godlike characters of mythology and presented them in human figures like Tripathi's character of Shiva. They portray the gods, goddesses, deities, superheroes as common human beings and try to look at the characters as well as incidents in a rational manner. Recently, some women writers like Kavita Kane, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Saiswaroopaa Iyer have made an attempt to deal with the mythic tales through an empowering feminist perspective disrupting the male-centric nature of the epic narratives. Their novels have subverted the traditional representation of women in two great epics and give a new modern identity to those women. For example, Chitra Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* retells the story of *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective. The book hits the best-seller list across the globe.

There are some other factors that have been considered as the reasons for this resurgence of mythology in popular writings. Some opine that the popularity of mythological writings in recent years has been triggered by the recent wave of Hindutva in India. Mythologist V. Raghunathan's comments in this regard,

Authors like Devdutt Pattanaik and Amish Tripathi may be instrumental in a spurt in the interest in mythology. Also, some contrarian books like *Asura* or *Duryodhana*, giving the vanquished version of mythological history, may be catching a attention. These developments may have been aided by a distinct wave of Hindutva resurgence that has been evident in recent times. (qtd. in Srivastava)

However, it cannot be directly said that the popularity of contemporary mythological books written by authors like Pattanaik, Tripathi has been increased because of the wave of Hindutva, because, these writers have distorted the rigid ideologies that the original Hindu mythology had set long years before and made new narratives in order to glorify the richness of Indian culture. Amish Tripathi once said in an interview with Parvathi Benu that he does not believe in any particular right and left ideology, he writes his mythological books, because “I believe in our culture...We should celebrate it rather than a feud over it” (Tripathi). Hence, contemporary mythological books appeal to all readers irrespective of their ideologies.

To sum up, the politics of mythmaking is a trend in contemporary writings that is becoming so popular. Through the techniques of retelling and rewriting, modernist writers have brought back those mythological stories among modern readers in a new way. According to Devdutt Pattanaik, mythological fiction is very popular as “it is fantasy rooted in already familiar mythological tales” (Pattanaik). These tales always compel people irrespective of their age and cast their spells on them. It is a part of people’s everyday life. The extensive use of mythology in contemporary writings shows that mythologies, far from being relics of the past, continue to have been influential in modern society too and as S. R. Sinha asserts, this fascination for interesting literature based on Indian myths and legends shall always continue (Sinha 137).

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