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Slavic Mythological Characters In Russian Literature, Beliefs And Festivals

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This article focuses on general overview of Slavic mythological belief system with special emphasis on popular mythological characters and their relevance in Russian literature and culture. Slavic mythology as the ancient Slavs' idea of the world around them is one of the components of Russian cultural heritage. Like all ancient people, Slavic people, who lived in the forests, tried to understand how the world works and to comprehend their place in it. Till present days Russian culture is full of beliefs based on ancient Slavic belief system of pre-Christian era, especially folk mysticism. Since childhood all Russians know folk tales about such Slavic mythological characters as Baba Yaga and Koschei Bessmertny. Every person of Eastern Slavic origin is aware that water is abode of water spirits i.e. rusalki and vodyanoi and before entering a forest it is better to please a forest spirit Leshy. And all Slavic people are united by glorifying the initial ancient Slavic God Rod with the words Slava Rodu! The features of Slavic mythology are reflected not only in public life and traditional beliefs, but also in literature. Mythological subjects and images occupy a significant place not only in the oral folk tradition, but also in the works of Russian writers and poets at different historical stages of the development of literature.

This article is the analysis of the origin of Russian traditional beliefs with the emphasis on Slavic mythological characters and their relevance in Russian literature, culture and festivals. The author uses such research methods as theoretical analysis of academic literature, linguistic and cultural analysis of Slavic mythology.

Keywords: Slavic mythology, folk mysticism, Russian folklore, Slavic beliefs, Russian literature, traditional Russian tales, Baba Yaga, rusalka, leshy.

An integral part of the development of the culture of any ethnic group is mythology and myths. They accompany the people in the early stages of their development. Man is inseparable from nature and depends on it and all ancient civilizations tried to find explanation for various phenomena occurring around them. Myths were the first attempt to comprehend and organize the world around us. They were passed down from generation to generation, and members of one culture believed them as truth. This way the mythological picture of the world was formed.

Slavic mythology and religion were formed during very long time in the process of separating the ancient Slavs from the Indo-European community of peoples in the 2nd-1st millennium BC and in interaction with the mythology and religion of neighboring peoples.

Slavic mythology is the basis of Russian culture and Russian traditional beliefs and folklore. Mythology is closely connected with many manifestations of culture. It influences literature, painting, language, religion,

epic. Russian literature of different historical ages is full of traditional folkloric characters, beliefs, superstitions or myths that are derived from ancient Slavic mythology.

According to Russian researcher Aleksandr Vlasov “The mythological ideas of the ancient Slavs are a real storehouse of the wisdom of our ancestors. These are not only pre-Christian deities, but also ideas about space and earth, about nature and its laws, about the life of animals and birds, about human destiny, about the hearth and its structure. It is a reflection of knowledge developed over centuries, and perhaps even millennia, of human practice” [1].

Slavic mythology is a complex and huge phenomenon that have been researched by many scholars, both Russian and international. It has its own theology, cosmogony and calendar. Numerous ancient Slavic rituals are still practiced by many people, and there are many ancient Slavic festivals that are still celebrated according to Slavic calendar and traditions.

According to ancient Slavic beliefs there are three realms: Yav – the manifested world – the world of humans and other living creatures, Nav – the unmanifested world which is divided into Light Nav - the world of the ancestors’ souls and spirits, and Dark Nav – the world of dark spirits, and Prav – the world of the Right – the world of Gods. Each of these worlds have different God, with the main Trinity of Gods in each of them. Yav, Nav and Prav differ from one another in what we would call vibrational frequency. All these 3 worlds are not in hierarchical order, but are closely interconnected. The changes in one of these worlds lead to the changes in the others. There are different ways to get from Yav to Nav or from Yav to Prav – all this is described in many folkloric tales and different beliefs, e.g. – to get from Yav to Nav one needs to cross the bridge called Kalinov Most over river Smorodina or to get from Yav to Prav one needs to cross river Ra.

Interestingly enough, modern Russian language is full of words which are derived from Slavic mythology. Reality of Russians is called “Yav”, e.g. we say “na yavu” – which means in reality, “yavlenie” – phenomenon, anything that is manifested in Yav, “yavlyatsya” – to be in real, etc.

On analogy there are many words that are derived from “Prav”, such as “Pravilniy” – correct, “pravit” – to rule, “spravedlivost” – justice, “pravitel’ – ruler, etc.

From “Nav” – “navazhdeniye” – obsession, etc.

And, of course, there are numerous words derived from the names of Slavic Gods.

Slavic mythology tales and fables have been passed down orally and later were recorded and collected also. Russian folklore is full of many ancient mythological characters. Most of them are some spirits or spirits-like evil creatures from Nav. Their characters have been thoroughly described in Russian folklore and later used by many Russian writers in their works. The most popular folkloric mythological characters are: Baba Yaga, Koschei Bessmertniy, Rusalka, Kikimora bolotnaya, Leshy, Babai, etc.

Kikimora Bolotnaya and Babai or Babaika are used by parents to threat the children when they don’t want to fall asleep.

Baba Yaga is perhaps the most popular character of Russian fairy tales, she is found in most of Russian folkloric tales. She is depicted as an old ugly witch, who lives in a forest in a small wooden house that spins on chicken legs. She is believed to steal, cook and eat her victims, usually children. She is portrayed as the one who can fly through the air in a mortar, using the pestle as a rudder and sweeping away the tracks behind her with a broom made out of silver birch (trees play vital role in Slavic mythology). As most of tales tell, her house does not reveal the door, until it is told a magical phrase “Turn your back to the forest, your front to me” [2].

In tales she flies through the air in a mortar using a pestle to steer with. Human bones surround her house forming a fence, the posts of which are topped with skulls. Usually there is one post left without a skull, so there is still space for the skull of the hero, should they fail in their allotted task.

Baba Yaga is sometimes shown as an antagonist, and sometimes as a source of guidance, there are many stories where she helps protagonists with their quests. There are stories where she kidnaps children and threatens to eat them. Seeking her aid is usually shown as a dangerous act. In such stories the emphasis is given to the need for proper preparation and purity of spirit of the protagonist, as well as on the protagonist's basic politeness.

She is the guardian of the border between the world of the living (Yav) and the world of the dead (Nav) and the guide for the dead souls. That's why Baba Yaga has bony leg: with one leg she is standing in the world of the living (Yav) and another in the netherworld (Nav).

Through different tests, she checks the hero and help him pass all the required rituals for the journey to the underworld and successful return.

Her magical abilities are rather extensive, like any witch, she has many servants among the animals and spirits. In one of the tales she was the mistress of three horsemen who symbolized the day, the sun and the night (white, red and black horsemen)- it turns out she could control the time. Sometimes she is the mother of other evil creatures - dragons, demons.

In the most ancient stories, she is the guardian of the forest and all creatures. Baba Yaga is not an evil symbol, but rather the embodiment of a severe nature, that does not forgive mistakes. Therefore, do not go too far into the forest, and don't disturb its inhabitants and most importantly the guardian of the forest. Later this role was passed on to forest spirit called Leshy.

Unlike European witches, she flies not on a broom, but in stupa. In many tales she steals children under cover of night, and boil them alive in a huge cauldron. Using trickery and magic, she can kill a grown man. In fact, her image is quite contradictory, in different stories Baba Yaga takes different roles. She can help the hero by giving him magic items, so he could defeat absolute evil.

In the folk tale *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, the young girl Vasilisa is sent to visit Baba Yaga and is enslaved by her, but the hag's servants—a cat, a dog, a gate, and a tree—help Vasilisa to escape because she has been kind to them. In the end, Baba Yaga is turned into a crow. Similarly, Prince Ivan, in *The Death of Koschei the Deathless*, is aided against her by animals whom he has spared [2]. In another version of the Vasilisa story recorded by Alexander Afanasyev, Vasilisa is given three impossible tasks that she solves using a magic doll given to her by her mother. In some fairy tales, such as *The Feather of Finist the Falcon*, the hero meets not with one but three Baba Yagas. Such figures are usually benevolent, giving the hero advice, or magical presents, or both [2].

The most recognisable attribute of Baba Yaga is a so called “cabin on chicken legs”. It sounds like pure fantasy and it is hard to believe that “cabin on chicken legs with no windows and no doors” where Baba Yaga lives, can exist. Interestingly enough, Baba Yaga's “cabin on chicken legs” can be based on real buildings.

There are three main theories regarding this type of strange construction.

According to the first of them, this is an interpretation of an ordinary construction popular among hunter-gatherer nomadic peoples of Siberia of Uralic and Tungusic origin, invented to preserve supplies against animals during long periods of absence. A doorless and windowless log cabin is built upon supports made from the stumps of two or three closely grown trees cut at the height of eight to ten feet. The stumps, with their spreading roots, give a good impression of "chicken legs". The only access into the cabin is via a trapdoor in the middle of the floor.

The second theory is that a similar but smaller construction was used by Siberian pagans to hold statues and figurines of their gods. Taking into account the late matriarchy among Siberian peoples, a common picture of a bone-carved doll in rags in a small cabin on top of a tree stump fits a common description of Baba Yaga, who barely fits in her cabin, with legs in one corner, head in another one, her nose grown into the ceiling.

According to the third theory, there are indications that ancient Slavs had a funeral tradition of cremation in huts of this type. In 1948, Russian archaeologists Yefimenko and Tretyakov discovered small huts of the described type with traces of corpse cremation and circular fences around them.

Baba Yaga is a famous character in popular culture. She is a favourite character of Russian films and cartoons. She appeared in *Vasilissa the Beautiful* - the first film with fantasy elements in Soviet Union. Baba Yaga has also been portrayed in two famous musical works - Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* and *Baba Yaga*, a symphonic poem by Anatoly Lyadov.

Despite of belonging to the Dark Nav, Baga Yaga has retained some of the human mother-like traits that's why she is widely loved by Russian people who grow up listening to tales about her, sometimes being frightened sometimes amazed at her witty guidance.

She has been a character of Russian literature until nowadays – modern poets have used her name which has become a metaphor for something dark and unexpected.

The most popular male mythological character is Koshei Bessmertniy (Koshei the Deathless). He is an archetypical male protagonist in Russian folklore, who is described mainly as the one who abducts the hero's wife. A figure from Slavic mythology known for its main characteristics – inability to die. He is mostly depicted as old, extremely tall, in excellent health, though very unhumanly thin male with unblinking reptilian eyes and a raven's beak of a nose that over a cavernous mouth. He is also known as a shape-shifter, sometimes seen as either a monster or a human. He is a womanizer, who preferred to kidnap his female victims in the form of a whirlwind tornado. The most important aspect of the mythical Koschei's being, however, was his absolute terror of death. This fear left him open to making mistakes, and his most fatal mistake was the imperfect spell that he cast to protect himself from harm.

According to most of the tales and legends, Koschei's mortality is contained in a needle that's placed somewhere very far. It is hidden in an egg, inside a duck, inside a hare that's inside a chest; the chest is buried under the roots of an oak tree, which grows on the invisible island of Buyan at an undisclosed location in the middle of the ocean-sea. Finding and breaking it is the only way to destroy him.

Interestingly, the most prominent tale of Koschei the Deathless has nothing to do with the egg that is the source of his immortality and strength. Instead, it is about his womanizing ways. Famous book of Russian tales collected by folklorist Alexander Afanasyev *Traditional Russian Tales* has the story of Koschei the Deathless, in which the life and love of Prince Ivan Tsarevitch is the focal point instead [2].

Koschei the Deathless is not a monster or the devil. He was once a powerful wizard or sorcerer with magical abilities to change into different shapes to serve his purposes. Some of his supernatural abilities include shape shifting, wielding power over the elements, and casting certain spells. Usually he was described as a monster wreaking havoc, the figure of a man or a tornado which allowed him to kidnap beautiful women.

In his quest for eternal life, he cast an unsuccessful spell that ultimately turned his mortality into an object, thus making him dependent on the material objects of the world, i.e. a needle and an egg. As a result, he became a destructive force of nature following his most basic primal instincts. Still, despite all of his powerful magic and awesome abilities, he has his vulnerabilities, the main ones being the egg and the needle, and his relationship to them.

In all tales Koschei was hideous looking, and even though he is perfectly capable of flying by turning into vapor or the wind he frequently appears naked as he rides a "magic steed" across the Caucasus Mountains while wrecking havoc. Yet, for all his power, Koschei had a weakness: a fear of dying. It was Koschei himself that cast a spell over his own life trying to guarantee his immortality. That spell, which required the removal of his soul, used a series of animals for protection. Because of this, he hid his soul in a needle, tucked inside an egg, inside a duck, inside a rabbit, locked in a chest, buried deep on an island. Koschei believed that if someone tried to get to his soul, the animals would flee and, in the process, continue to protect him. However, if his opponent was able to get to the egg, he would have control over Koschei and could even potentially kill him. Controlling Koschei the Deathless, however, does not mean you get to

access his abilities. On the contrary, the longer you have the egg that contains his mortality, the less powerful he ultimately becomes.

Another Slavic mythological character from the dark world of Nav who is often mentioned in Russian traditional tales and beliefs is Leshy. He is the forest spirit, defender of animals, birds and all plants. This character is found in many fairy tales. He often acts as a helper of the protagonist, or as a minor character who causes difficulties to the protagonist. But in the original mythology it is a cruel evil spirit, hostile to people.

It is difficult to describe his appearance, because he is able to transform into anything: into the grass or mushroom, any animal or even human, can move under the earth and in the sky. In front of people most often he appears in a humanoid form.

According to beliefs, if you meet a stranger in the forest, carefully look at him as it may turn out he is Leshy. There are three signs to identify Leshy: bright green eyes, shoes are put on in reverse (heels forward), he has no shadow.

Usually Leshy hurts only people, who behaves badly in the forest. He can lure a man deep in the forest and leave him at the mercy of the beasts. According to tales and beliefs he likes to intimidate and deceive people with different sounds such as claps or shouts. Most often he makes people lost in the woods forever. Leshy bypasses the man in a circle, thus he creates a closed magical zone and carries the mortal from the world of the living, into the world of spirits, from which there is no way out. At the will of Leshy, a man can easily get lost even in a very well known small area, in between two or three pine trees, as the Russian saying goes.

So before entering the forest people address Leshy, leave food for him and promise him that they will not do any harm to the forest and its inhabitants. These beliefs are present till nowadays. There is a popular belief that if one gets lost in a forest one needs to wear the clothes inside out and this will help to find a way out of the forest.

One of the most popular water/field spirits in Slavic mythology is rusalka. It is a very famous character of Slavic mythology, somewhat close to Greek sirens and Celtic mermaids, though quite different from them.

She is a female entity, often malicious toward mankind and frequently associated with water. Unlike many modern Western depictions, Slavic rusalka is not a mermaid – she is a beautiful young woman who has legs, can walk on land, enjoys dancing, singing and climbing trees.

According to prominent Russian folklorist and researcher of Russian traditional tales Vladimir Propp [3], originally Slavic people believed rusalka was linked with fertility cult and did not consider rusalki evil before the 19th century. It was believed rusalki (plural for rusalka) came out of the water in spring to transfer life-giving moisture to the fields and thus helped nurture the crops. The concept of rusalki originated from a Slavic pagan tradition where the young women were symbols of fertility. These nymphs did not interfere too much with human life and mainly served to provide moisture to the fields and forests every spring when they came ashore to dance in the spring moonlight. The water spirits were believed to help crops grow plentifully and so were generally treated with respect.

There is a theory explaining connection of rusalka with water.

According to Russian linguist and ethnographer Dmitry Zelenin [4], young women, who either committed suicide by drowning due to unhappy marriage or who were violently drowned against their will have to live out their designated time on Earth as rusalki. It is accounted by most stories that the soul of a young woman who had died in or near a river or a lake would come back to haunt that waterway. This rusalka is not invariably malevolent, and would be allowed to die in peace if her death is avenged. Her main purpose is, however, to lure young men, seduced by either her looks or her voice, into the depths of said waterways where she would entangle their feet with her long red hair and submerge them. Her body would instantly become very slippery and not allow the victim to cling on to her body in order to reach the surface. She would then wait until the victim had drowned, or, on some occasions, tickle them to death, as she laughed.

It is also believed, by a few accounts, that rusalki can change their appearance to match the tastes of men they are about to seduce. However, the initial Slavic lore suggests that not all rusalki occurrences were linked with death from water.

It is worth mentioning that rusalka is one of the most varied images of folk mysticism and very region specific. The notions of rusalka that exist in the Russian North, the Volga region, the Urals, and Western Siberia differ significantly from those in Western Russia and South Russia. It was believed that rusalka or rusalki took care of fields, forests and waters.

According to beliefs, rusalki haunt lakes, rivers, ponds, marshes, swamps, and any other body of water. They are often described as being slim with large breasts. They are pale-skinned and have long, loose hair that is either blonde, light brown, or green. Their eyes are said to not contain pupils and, if the rusalka is wicked, can be blazing green. Invariably, the women wear light, sheer robes as though made of mist. Rusalki are representations of universal beauty and even the wicked ones are greatly admired and feared in Slavic culture.

According to many beliefs and tales, rusalki can climb trees and sing songs, sit on docks with only submerged feet and comb their hair, or even join other rusalki in circle dances in the field. A particular feature of such stories is that this behaviour would be limited to only certain period of the year, a one week in summer called Rusalka Week.

Some features of rusalka differ in different Eastern Slavic countries. In Russia, they appeared as women who come out of the water on Kupala night and participate in the festival without harming anyone. However, sometimes they tickled men to death.

According to folk beliefs, the most powerful repellent against rusalka is garlic. Rusalki were believed to be at their most dangerous during Rusalki Week or Green Week. It is an ancient Slavic fertility festival celebrated in early June and closely linked with the cult of the dead and the spring agricultural rites. Rusalki play important part in Green week traditions. Some believe they were associated with deceased family members, or perhaps only to untimely dead. Sometimes an honored birch tree would be named for a rusalka as part of Green Week. Some of the rites of Green Week like making offerings of eggs and garlands were thought to please rusalki so they would stay away from the village's agricultural fields and not bring them harm. The rusalki are also associated with water and fertility, and so may be invoked during Green Week in an attempt to bring their moisture and vigor to the fields.

The whole Green Week rusalki were believed to be more active, making them a greater threat to humans. During this time, swimming in any body of water is absolutely forbidden, as it will mean certain death. The rusalki are believed to come ashore to play in the weeping willow and swing in birch trees, then they gather together to perform circle dances under the moonlight. Any passerby who should have the misfortune of witnessing one of these events is forced to dance with them until he dies.

Interestingly enough, one common feature of the celebration of Rusalki Week was the ritual burial of rusalki at the end of the week, which remained as a folk tradition in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine until the 1930s.

Rusalki feature in many Russian and Slavic artworks including paintings, operas, and novels. One of the most famous literary works about rusalka was written by Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. The poem gives a good depiction of how rusalki are imagined in Slavic cultures.

Some of the most popular literary and art works include the following:

Rusalka – poem by Alexander Pushkin

Rusalka – poem by Mikhail Lermontov

1989 – *Rusalka*, a fantasy novel, part of The Rusalka trilogy of novels by C. J. Cherryh features and revolves around a rusalka named Eveshka.

2018 - *The Mermaid: Lake of the Dead*, a horror film about a rusalka who falls in love with a man and places a curse on him.

Rusalka is also one of the beliefs of Ivan Kupala Night. Since ancient times Slavic people have celebrated the summer solstice as the day of Ivan Kupala. In Eastern Slavic countries according to traditional Julian calendar it falls on the night between 6th to 7th July.

Summer solstice is celebrated as mystical holiday, filled with songs, chants, fortune-telling and legends. During the day of Ivan Kupala, young girls made wreaths of herbs and flowers and in the evening floated them on the water watching as they drift away. A sinking wreath indicated the end of love for that girl, for that year and that she must wait another year to be married.

There is an ancient Kupala belief that the eve of Ivan Kupala is the only time of the year when ferns bloom. Scientists tell us that ferns reproduce by spores and never flowers. But according to legend, once a year, that particular time at midnight the mysterious fern begins to bloom. This miraculous and fiery flower would point to a buried treasure regardless of how deep it had been hidden. Around midnight, a white bud appears on the wide fern leaf. Anyone seeing this beautiful flower would have their deepest wish fulfilled. Prosperity, luck and power befall whom ever finds a fern flower. Therefore, on that night, village folk roam through the forests in search of magical herbs, and especially, the elusive fern flower. Traditionally, unmarried women, signified by the garlands in their hair, are the first to enter the forest. They are followed by young men. Therefore, the quest to find herbs and the fern flower may lead to the blooming of relationships between pairs within the forest.

This legend was mentioned in the famous story *The Eve of Ivan Kupala* by Nikolai Gogol [5]. In this story a young man finds the fantastical fern-flower, but is cursed by it. Gogol's tale was adapted by Yuri Ilyenko into a film of the same name, and perhaps was inspiration for Modest Mussorgsky to compose his musical poem *Night on Bald Mountain*.

Another Slavic legend states that on this night of Ivan Kupala, the beautiful young mermaid, rusalka can be found in bodies of water. Rusalka enjoys enticing young men to their demise. Although there are many different stories concerning the legend of Rusalka, they typically involve young women dying violent deaths sometimes at their own hands. Commonly, the death is by drowning and often revolves around women betrayed by a lover or husband. During Ivan Kupala, Rusalka leaves her lake or swamp and wanders through the woods searching for her lost love. When she comes upon a young man, she will lure him back into the dark water where he will spend eternity with her.

Many of the rites related to this holiday are connected with the role of water in fertility and ritual purification.

Fire also is used for ritual purification purposes. On Kupala Night, young people jump over the flames of bonfires in a ritual test of bravery and faith. The failure of a couple in love to complete the jump while holding hands is a sign of their destined separation.

Recent years have shown an increasing interest in Slavic mythology. Many modern Slavs are returning to the roots of their ancient religion and celebrating their culture and traditions of old.

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