

Fusion of Myth and Fantasy in Girish Karnad's Play 'Yayati' and Shashi Tharoor's Novel 'The Great Indian Novel'

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Abstract

'Myth' is a term of complex history and meaning. In Greek it means 'muthos' 'anything uttered by word of mouth'. In the contemporary literature 'myth' and 'mythology' is used very often. A myth is a story which is fictional. It involves supernatural beings or supra-human beings. Myth is usually concerned with creation. Myth and mythology are one among the precursors of tradition. Therefore, it might be said that myth and mythology play a pivotal role with in the formation and up-keeping of tradition. When it involves Fantasy, many readers expect that literary fiction provides desperately needed escapism so they can endure the difficulties of everyday life. This effect is even more pronounced with in the fantasy genre. Girish Karnad's *Yayati* and Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* both the plays undermining the ages old Indian complacency displayed in accepting everything ancient and anything foreign. It is a strange vision of contemporary India retold within the garb of the traditional tale of storytelling. This paper tries to discuss how Karnad and Tharoor proved their fictional artistry in fusing myth and fantasy in their creative writing. They both use the resources of fiction so as to explicate their vision of the past by way different mixtures of fantasy and myth.

Keywords: Myth, Fantasy, fictional artistry, traditional tale of storytelling.

The art of literary creativity witnesses experimentation with the ever-changing cycles of tradition and modernity. The contemporary literary firmament has witnessed the ever-growing wave of retelling and reinterpretation which resulted in portrayal of the past experiences in mythic retelling blended with the modern texture. In this context, the plays *Yayati* and the novel, *The Great Indian Novel* have originated from Indian mythology and history. But on closer analysis, we will come to know that these two works of art also exhibit a strong element of fantasy.

To appreciate the concept of myth and fantasy in these two works of art, we must have knowledge of the characteristic features of a work of fantasy. Some of the characters of a work of fantasy are the play of imagination, breaking of sexual taboos, problems of vision and visibility, strong degree of social and class prejudice, repressed female energy, presence of enclosures, yearning for immortality, feeling of incompleteness, fascination with suicide and death, unnatural metamorphosis or transformation, disintegration, dualism and powerful mental struggle in the characters, roots in ancient mythology.

This literature of subversion which is closely associated with imagination and with desire makes these plays free from the restraints of the realistic texts. These two art work are a perfect illustration of a fantasy

literature since it satisfies all the criteria that are required for a work of fantasy. In order to attain deeper insight to study and analyse, Karnad and Tharoor, it would not be inappropriate to discuss how both of them had employed myth and fantasy in the play *Yayati* and the novel, *The Great Indian Novel*.

Girish Karnad's *Yayati* is characterized by myth, legend, fantasy, folk tale and history not only for literary purpose but also as a surrogate to portray the contemporary situations. When it comes to Shashi Tharoor, in *The Great Indian Novel* takes *Mahabharata* as the blueprint and fills it with a contemporary cast for his witty rendering of pre-Independent and post-Independent India. Regarding the use of myth Hazel E. Barnes' remark is very pertinent. He says,

In a period when values are relatively stable, authors tend to use the classical myths merely allusively, enriching the poetic quality of their work with layers of older connotations. In an age more obviously transitional there is likely to be more of new interpretation. (1984: 110)

Karnad's creative genius lies in taking up fragments of historical-legendary experience and fusing them into a forceful statement. By using the grammar of literary archetype, he links the past and the present, the archetypal

and the real. By using these myths, he tries to reveal the absurdity of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts and man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection. Tharoor also in his novel, *The Great Indian Novel* borrows from the story of 'The Mahabharata', the great epic of Hindu mythology; which re-forms the epic in the context of Indian Independence Movement. Tharoor has reinvented 'The Mahabharata' in *The Great Indian Novel*. The figures and characters are taken from Indian history and transformed into characters from Hindu mythology. Chakrabarti puts forward the same views:

As The Great Indian Novel blends myth and history, two different times operate in the very beginning of the novel: mythical time and historical time.

Karnad delves deep into the traditional myths to spell modern man's agony and predicaments that are created in his mind. For example, he presents the age-old story of the mythological King Yayati who was the tenth in the line of the Brahma's family. Karnad has portrayed the delimitations of the real world, i.e. when we laugh, the world will laugh with us, but when we are in sorrow, we will be alone, deserted even by our kith and kin. Though Yayati succeeds in transforming his old age and his sins to Puru, he acts in the most irresponsible way by usurping the happiness of his son and daughter-in-law. Karnad, through the portrayal of the character of Yayati, focuses on the theme of attachment to life and its pleasures. Yayati realizes the horrors of his selfish action of exchange of youth in the later period, only after the suicide of his daughter-in-law and he readily owns the responsibility for the havoc that befell the family and returns the youth of his son Puru and retires to the forest as a hermit. Through the life of Yayati, the dramatist brings out the fact that selfish paternal authority and blind familial loyalty could bring ruin to a family when it is misappropriated.

Likewise, Tharoor also recasts the story of Indian democracy as a struggle between groups and individuals for their personal and political gains. The novel is a blend of myth and reality. In this novel, mythology is imported through the ancient mythical figures. The reality is presented through the historical figures of modern India. The challenge before the reader is how he has to distinguish between myth and reality as there is a very thin line that separates them. The novel satirizes the modern political set up and descends its stimulus from the mythical past of India. *The Great Indian Novel* presents two different times from the very beginning: mythical time and historical time. In a seminar essay entitled 'Myth, History and Fiction' Tharoor states:

"The Great Indian Novel is an attempt to retell the political history of twentieth century India through a fictional recasting of events, episodes and characters from the Mahabharata. Further, he (1990:7) calls his novel as "An attempt of yoking of myth to history." (1991:384)

Both the writers' Protagonists recognize the horror of their own life and assume moral responsibility after a series of symbolic encounters with reality. Thus, both the playwright takes liberty with the original myths and invents some new relationship to make it acceptable to modern sensibilities. Both Karnad and Tharoor seems to have used this myth with a view to exposing the absurdity of life with all its rudimentary passions and conflicts, and also to show man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection.

The purpose of theatre is solely to depict the life of the whole universe, Karnad and Tharoor, through the element of myth have effectively portrayed the contemporary world making their portrayal universally appealing. In both the works, the usage of myth and fantasy serves as a tool to keep the aura of the works sound traditional in taste, while both the works, deal with the most modern thoughts.

Karnad and Tharoor, were able to successfully fuse the present with the past and serves a contemporary relevance by using myth and fantasy. Their works definitely transcend the traditional use of literature- to educate and to delight. Both the authors, indulge in myth – making but also retold the history with their own understanding and interpretation. There is no wonder that they have been hailed as one of the most appealing and successful authors of the contemporary Indian Literature. Myth and history in the hands of Karnad and Tharoor are not just instruments to visit the past, but are used also to contemplate the possibilities which the future seems to hold.

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