



Mythology and Ancient Cultures

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Abstract

Mythology is the mother of culture. All the stories from world mythologies have only one aim that is to create a cultured society. There can be no culture without mythology. You may believe those stories or not but one thing is sure that your life is moulded by myths. They are not created by one single man. But they are the creation of collective unconsciousness of a nation and its people grown up through thousands of years. One can't deny the importance of myths and their relationship with culture.

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Full Text

The renowned Indian mythologist Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik once said in his public speech that India has many versions of *Ramayana* in different languages and narrated by different authors. But which is the best and the oldest *Ramayana*? His answer is very classic. He said the best version of *Ramayana* is that which a mother tells her growing child. There is a very deep meaning in his statement that a mother tells her child stories from *Ramayana* to make good *Sanskaras* on the child. What does this mean? It means that mythology is the mother of culture.

Myths are very ancient. They came into existence before art, before language, before even written word, and even before religion. They contain innumerable stories, a philosophy of a particular race of people, the question about human existence and the knowledge is imparted through the stories of Gods and Goddess.

They may seem fairy tales to a nonbeliever but they are the gist of life and culture for the believers. All great works of literature are based upon mythic themes and stories. The struggles of existence, changing moods of nature and man's conscious and unconscious efforts to face natural and social calamities gave birth to different mythological stories. Therefore these stories have a philosophy of their own. They also contain some scientific truth symbolized in the stories. Myths are very powerful instrument of social awakening and psychology of a culture. They are called shared social unconscious. The mythos, the stories, the social dreams have brought up culture wide symbols. Carl Gustav Jung's theory of archetypes explain in detailed the relationship between literature and myths.

In popular parlance myths are called untrue stories. The great ancient civilizations have brought many myths. The Greek myths, Roman myths, Gaelic myths and Indian myths are very famous. They are a kind of revealed world of God. Mythologies teach us respect for alien culture. These are my people stories, I would like to hear yours. This is how ancient myths travelled from one country to another. Myths make your personality. You can't be called a developed person unless you have imbibed in yourself some good thoughts, good behavior, right or wrong notions, or some kind of philosophy. Every cultured man has percolated within him some mythology of his race. That is why we have said that mythology is the mother of culture. The stories of myths are wonderful and entertaining as well as enlightening. It may not be exclusive truth but a myth has some knowledge and some advice suitable for our time and also for future. Epics like *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, Ramayana and Mahabharata are the greatest treasure houses of myths.

Myths have no geographical boundaries. They travel in time also. Since they have a variety of experiences of life, they also teach lessons for new generations. That is why we find similarities in many myths of the world. Roman myths have many parallels in the myths of other countries. Not because they have travelled in time but because human nature is the same all over the world.

Today's politics becomes tomorrows history, todays history becomes tomorrow's legends and todays legends becomes tomorrows myth. For example Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar are India's legendary figures. After two thousand years they may become mythological figures. The roots of mythology have spread into classical Hinduism, Vedic Civilization and Ancient Vedic myths. The epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata serves as religious scriptures and also a source of philosophy and morality. Hindu laws and code of conduct resulted in righteousness of the people of a race. Bhagwat Gita, the Bible and other books are parts of their culture. You can't show where myths end and culture begins. Myths are called *Puranas* in Marathi. They contain traditions related to ancient kings, seers, and incarnations of God (*avatars*). They make various comments on

cosmology also. Among Christians nativity of Christ is very famous myth. So also *Ram Navami and Krishna Janmashtami* are very popular myths of Hindus.

The social relationship, family bonding, quarrels of cousins over property, personal enmity all these seem to be a matter of today's world. But the same have their roots in myths also. Kane and Abel of Christian mythology, Kauravas and Pandavas of Mahabharata, Vali and Sugriva of Ramayana all seem to be blue prints of modern day quarrels over property. The trinity of Christianity God, Son and Holy Spirit is found repeated in different symbolic forms. The Hindu trinity Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh is also very important. Besides them there are lesser Gods, demi Gods and spirits.

In Indian mythology the oldest war between Sur and Asur led to *Samudra Manthan* or the churning of the ocean by God and Rakshasa. This very episode gave birth to many myths. They teach us importance of righteousness and morality. All the stories from mythology have some purpose behind them. And the common purpose is to create a good society which has at its base the greatest good of the greatest number of people, and so they are the torch bearers of cultures. No society can be called cultured society if it does not have good laws, morality and truth. This is done only by myths, and these values are inculcated in the minds of people generations after generations. This is the role of myth in the formation of culture.

An ancient story which answers fundamental and difficult questions that human being asks may be called a myth. Who am I? Where did I come from? Why I am here? How should I live? What is the right thing to do? What is the universe? How did it begin? All these questions have harassed human mind for centuries, and they gave birth to myths of creation and laws of morality. The famous biblical story Adam and Eve, Satan in the form of serpent, the fruit of knowledge, temptation to eat the fruit, and the result brought about by original sin can never be forgotten. They answer the questions of present day sorrows and troubles. Similar stories are there in the myths of other countries. Some people think that myth spring from religion and vice versa. Religion come from myths. All great works of literature are nothing but retold universal mythic themes. The writers and poets who use myths for their creativity have *mythopoeic* vision. So they create new myths also. For example Noah's Ark, Jonah and the Great Fish are used in Moby - Dick, Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea, and W.B.Yeats poems are presented with mythopoeic vision. Yeat's love for Maud Gonne all are the modern days myths which repeat human experiences and give a cultural thrust to literature. Hence the relationship between myths and culture is no doubt very strong and basic fact.