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**REDEFINING SELF AND SOCIETY: USE OF MYTH AS A
TROPE FOR IDENTITY IN INDIAN LITERATURES IN
ENGLISH**

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| Keywords | Abstract |
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| <p><i>Ways Of Life, Mythic Realism, Collective Consciousness, Fables.</i></p> | <p>Belief in supernatural events, elves and spirits shaping human destiny and the knack for tracing imprints of imitable 'ways of life' by courtesy the ennobling examples set by characters in myths and legends, have been the features of literature(s) from time immemorial and in the Indian context, these have actuated writerly concerns from the time of the epics down to that of the recent pandemic. The repositing of the self in terms of the society which is further built up with a palimpsest of values and cultural inputs accrued in the collective consciousness over generations, forms more or less the crux of Indian literature both in the colonial and postcolonial literature. The 'world-creating' dimension of words in India's Katha literature as utilized in the works of nationalist writers like Anand and Narayan, the strong 'spirit of place' in the novels of Raja Rao, the 'rootedness' of Narayan's Malgudi as a quintessential Indian town in respect of its 'mythic realism' and the proliferative use of fables and folktales permeating the warp and woof of literatures of India's North-east, unmistakably testify to how myths and legends, in overt or oblique</p> |



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| | ways, are incorporated in the creation of literature. The present article focuses on the role of myth in some major novels of R. K. Narayan and some selective poems of North-east India. |
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1. INTRODUCTION

All the Stars of the Night with their glow,

Lie only hidden in Day's dazzling show.

(Tagore's Hothat Dekha. Sanchayita.,p.719.Tr.)

Myths have ever been used in literature both as archetype as well as structure so as to create a cultural contemporaneity of human experience by situating man in a larger continuum of time and space. Indian Literatures in the generic sense and Indian English Fiction in the specific, have also sought to re-position the self and the society in the spectrum of oral narratives of myths, legends and folktales that provide frames of attitudes and references which serve to problematise human experience vis a vis societal/communal values, beliefs, habits of thought and practice. The use of myth in ways obvious or suggestive, rationalises the actions/events in an ordered sequence of situations and in the process of projecting belief systems or rituals, may serve to direct social action and values apart from cosmogonic or cosmological implications.

In the postcolonial context of cultural documentation of the indigenous experience that seeks to subvert the iconisation of the West through grand narratives, treatment of myth in literature helps to establish important values or aspects of a culture's worldview. The concepts of sthalapurana in the novels of Raja Rao, the re-creation of the mythic river Sarayu as the life-line in R.K.Narayan's genius-locus Malgudi, the proliferation of fables and folk-lores around the evolution of habitation along the banks of Bramhaputra river in the North-East or the re-telling of the mythic saga of Bhadu or Tusu in the literatures of South Bengal, the Tripuri tribal literatures on the Garia myth or the Manipuri literatures centering the Rasa utsav of Lord Krishna -- are only some random examples drawn from a Pan-Indian context, of how a subterranean perception of myth as a formative influence on the Indian psyche has motivated the representational urge for literary production over the decades. This paper seeks to focus on a creative use and consciousness of myth that gives an aura of a mythic realism to R.K.Narayan's fiction with particular reference to *The Guide* (1958) and *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) along with a cursory glance at the mythopoeic character of the poetry of North East India.

As for Narayan, it is relevant to mention some of his famous quotations as noted below:

"After all, for any ... story writer (Indian), the prototype still inevitably remains to be our own epics and mythological stories. 1

To be a good writer anywhere you must have roots- both in religion and family. I have these things.2

Only the story matters... that's all.



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Perhaps the word 'Story' in the present context is suggestive of the following attributes -- a gripping plot, 'world creating' dimensions of the 'word' with philosophical and moral significance, the indigenous tradition of orality as more a trait of history than a mode of fiction, etc.etc.)

Narayan's use of Myths: More as Types than Structures

Narayan's trilogy comprising *The Guide* (1958), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) and *The Man-eater of Malgudi* (1961) shows a conscious use of myth both as archetype or structure. Critic Afzal-Khan has traced 'a realm of mythic realism' in Narayan's novels. The novels discussed in this paper show an artistic use of myths in the portraiture of the protagonists and the cultural significance of the trails of experiences they undergo.

Raju's experiences in *The Guide* project his progress through a process of self-deception leading to a conscious dislocation from his own cultural roots in his exclusive penchant for an extremely individual entity in the postcolonial social reality of India. The hubris in Raju, his 'lack of ordinary character' along with his tendency for wrong judgment, do not leave him even after his immoral involvement with Rosie and his consequent progress in self-degradation that finally lead him to imprisonment. Raju's interaction with the villagers of Mangala also demonstrates initially, the same urge in Raju to capitalise his 'water-diviner's instinct' of a guide for the practical needs of food and shelter. But when he gets entangled in an enforced fast, an ordeal of faith, when the villagers expect a saintly performance from Raju to save the village from a severe drought, Raju, the former sinner, transcends his self-interest and with a perfect spiritual identification with the cause of community-interest, ends as a saint. Raju's end is a perfect correlative of the transcendent aspect of Indian life, a teleological prospect of Indian spiritualism that reserves the scope of moksha, deliverance from the process of self-deception even for the most erring soul on earth.

However, the prevalent tenor of literary criticism concerning Narayan's works, more or less exalts the transformation in Raju as a miracle of faith and this transformation as if comes *sui generis* and seldom there has been a conscious critical effort to problematise this transformation in Raju as a part of Narayan's textual strategy of exploring the cultural matrix of Indian reality that ever opens up a dimension of transcendence. It is significant that Raju's experiences following his release from prison correspond to an altogether different cultural space symbolised by Mangala which represents the unsoiled stratum of Indian culture where faith in God, Yogis and miracles co-exist with feuds and struggles for existence, where traditional values are enshrined even amidst the stringent trials of faith. It is a textual strategy of Narayan in the shifting of his ethos from Malgudi, a hybridised locale where Raju fails to cope up with reality, to Mangala where Raju's self-esteem and guiding instinct is set to negotiate a different ordeal of faith and expectation from a simple minded, believing community.

The theme of transcendence in Raju's role of a saint no doubt evokes an impression of a spiritual, mystic phenomenon, but this element is only a major portion of that part of Indian culture which continues to exist according to Ramesh Sree, in the 'collective unconscious mind of the Indian psyche' (Sree 211). The complexity in Narayan's fictional art is manifested also in his problematic



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use of myth in the present sociological context of postcolonial Indian society. However, a simultaneous presentation of a ‘carnavalesque’ character of the mela, with its ‘space-time Interconnectedness’⁴ vis-à-vis Raju's ingenious progress towards self-denial, is also another case in point that establishes a cultural hybridity in post-Independence India.

According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, the order-disorder-order pattern discernible in the journey of protagonists in almost all the novels of Narayan gives rise to a problematic: "... whether Narayan was consciously using myth as a technique or was it an unconscious manifestation of the basic outlook which sees in the existing order of things a desired stability that should be permanent, and any external element threatening to change this order as something illusory" (Mukherjee 144). In this connection Mukherjee contends that the treatment of revolt in Narayan's characters underscores the novelist's belief 'in nature's ingrained scheme to balance the disorderly world and restore order'. The critic observes in this context:

Narayan sees any sudden change not for what it produces, for what new possibilities it brings into existence [...] but much more negatively as a play of shadows, an illusion, an unreality like a bubble which will burst sooner or later, and the normal order of the cosmos will prevail again. (Mukherjee 145).

For Narayan, myths in the context of literary use can at best offer in the present-day world, ‘types and symbols’ that have a veritable contemporaneity in the writer's experiences of men and manners. Krishna Sen finds that Narayan has made a subversive use of myth in the issue of the villagers' acceptance of Raju as a saint. She identifies Raju's wrong, aimless and unfinished account of the story of Devaka as ‘emblematic of Raju's own life’, ‘without shape and purpose’. In the opinion of Krishna Sen, ‘the abandoned deity seems to gesture at Raju's flawed nature [...]. The mythical and scriptural allusions, instead of affirming an archetypal world-view, are actually subverting the world of empirical reality and being subverted by them in return’ (Sen 96). The critic however finds an intersection of myth and reality in Raju's assuming of the responsibility of a redeemer despite his imperfections, in his self-sacrifice – where ‘Raju plays out the greatest of his many self-chosen roles’ (Sen 97).

However, some other critics like Chitra Sankaran have found Narayan's use of myth in the novel to be convincing so as to offer a rationale for Raju's career. Sankaran in her book entitled *The Myth Connection* (1993), points out the ‘Valmiki-Ratnakar’⁵ myth stating that Raju's life embodies the mythic paradigm of the ‘trickster sage’ like Valmiki who manifests his divinity in the ambience of the Sanskrit ‘Katha’ literature through a chain of deluding stages - similar to the ‘maya’ or ‘lila’ with a fair share of ‘human imperfections’. Impartially speaking, Narayan's use of myth so far related to the development in Raju, corresponds to his aim at locating his character in a larger continuum of place and time, in a bigger frame-work of cultural reference that imbues every experience with a philosophical and moral significance.

In *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), Jagan's experiences show an arduous progress of realisation through the mazes of cultural conflict between tradition and modernity. Jagan's Gandhism marks his



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character with its moorings in the stronghold of tradition/ideology whereas Mali, his wayward son, is an instance of extreme individualism, a pronounced Western trait. Mali's ways of life wear out Jagan who, notwithstanding his lack of critical and intellectual self-awareness of the Gandhian ideology, has lived so long in harmony with a commitment to tradition. Jagan's retirement to Nallappa's grove, which Afzal Khan thinks to be symbolic of India's 'mythical retreat in Narayan's fiction' (khan 30), where he hopes to see the idol of the goddess of radiance emerge out of a stone, symbolically stands for his new janma, which here means his existence in the 'vanaprastha'⁶ stage life in the Ashramadharma system of Indian tradition. It is a stage that recommends a retirement from worldly duties and responsibilities so as to prepare the soul for renunciation, the Sannyas, at an advanced stage of life. The 'truth', an authentic space for existence, that has so long remained unattained to a skin-deep idealist like Jagan, now seems to appear in its real form, to the awakened soul of the Gandhian sweet-vendor of Malgudi whose superficial perception of 'satyagraha'⁷ has by now, matured into a positive vision of an empirical form of reality.

It is obvious that such an identity, as acquired by Raju and Jagan, testifies to an unsoiled stratum of Indian life and culture, a 'palimpsest' of values that perhaps constitutes the 'inner strength' of Indian life, as Narayan has explained in his essay "India and America". 'It is through subtle, inexplicable influences, through religion, family ties and human relationships in general let us call them - psychological "inputs", to use a modern term - which cumulatively sustain and lend variety and richness to existence' (Writer's Nightmare, 239).

Poetry of the North-east: A Beckoning of the Lost Elysium?

The overall tenor of the poetry of North East also articulates an urge for reclaiming the lost Identity, the lost Elysium of peace amidst the cacophony of traumatic experience of exile, terror and migration. A recurrent telescoping of the happy past and a tensed present beckons the haze of an uncertain future where the perception of a vague fear in the form of apparitions and ghosts often plague the poet as in the piece entitled Volcano You Cannot Erupt by Manipuri poet Thangjam Ibopishak:

...Volcano... you cannot erupt

Volcano, stay asleep...

Lava remain slumbering..."(lines 1-5)

When Temsula Ao of Nagaland speaks lyrically in her poem Stone-People from Lungterok the past as history appears in a state of animated suspension or suspended animation:

Lungterok, The six stones

Where the progenitors

And forebears

Of the stone-peccole

Were born

Out of the womb

Of the earth" (lines 1-8)



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A gnawing concern for contemporary ecocide breeds social and political tensions of North East with mainstream society. For Temsula, storytelling is a powerful weapon of subversion, of protest, representing the power of man in shaping reality through language. In the poem 'The Old Story Teller', the agency of storytelling offers the possibility of change with an acknowledgement of 'racial responsibility' in the urge for 'perpetuating the existential history and essential tradition' in the posterity and thus providing the world of readers a rich storehouse of North-Eastern folk-lore:

So I told stories

As my racial responsibility

To instill in the young

The art of perpetuating

Existential history and essential tradition

To be passed on to the next generation.(lines 33-38)

Language becomes a metaphor for potential change. Stories within the fabric of northeastern folklore provide the theoretical framework of their writing.

Similarly in the works of a poet like Chandrakanta Mura Singh of Tripura, one comes across discourses on dream visions and primitive vitality in the form of love overcast by a strong mythical suggestiveness. The poem *The Stone Speaks in the Forest* for example, seems to be rich with a mythic symbolism. The stone pressed by the feet of a king looking for a golden deer and also bearing the tears and dreams of some commoner such as a frustrated lover, seems to outgrow into a living entity equipped with the agency for speech. The closing lines gesture to the stone as the form of 'life petrified' showing parallels to myth (as in Ahalya's case in the Ramayana) or popular imagination (as for example the stone images in Unokoti of North Tripura):

The stone speaks in the forest,

Bow and arrow in hand.

(Chandrakanta 2009, p.184. L.22-23)

A mythopoeic treatment of nature contextualizing the present scenario also distinguishes the poetry of Bijoy Debbarma, a significant poetic figure of Tripura. One of his noted poems *Why Should I go?* reads, as the name suggests, like a poetic testament containing his apology as a poet (also as an individual) for his affiliation to his indigenous roots in course of his cultural odyssey through different métiers of experience which are most often not without lures of opulence and power threatening to trammel up traditional ways of life. The disquieting awareness of an unwholesome nature of experience, of an emerging change, is aptly expressed in the following lines:

Those innumerable roads lead towards the road royale.

Random winds blow from that direction;

Dress disrobed, hair disarranged, a scorching feel of the blast.

(Bijoy 2017. P. 87.L.10-12)

Being used to his familiar space—containing the mythical 'Chethuang forest', 'the tongghar in the orchard', with scenic spots like Longtarai, Shakantan, Jompui, Atharamura,' the persona can



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repudiate the narratives of something 'new', fascinating reality which is termed as below: "A distant lyric comes floating far beyond, /tune unknown and unheard, but new in appeal"(lines15-16). While the tantalizing charms of an exotic reality cause emotional perturbations in the poet (by 'breaking boundaries, leaving addresses'L.18), the agitation at the core is quelled by the poet's allegiance to his sustaining values or moorings as reiterated in the closing lines of the poem:

Innumerable murmurs creep into the heart,

Revolting at every step –

Why should I go? Why?

– discarding the roots, far away from the origin.

(Lines 19-22).

Thus, a subterranean consciousness of myth negotiating the contradictory claims of reality characterizing existence, over all marks the poetry of Bijoy Debbarma.

Use of myth as an archetype or a symbol is also envisioned in the works of poets of Meghalaya. For example, in Desmond. L. Kharmawphlang's poem Last Night I dreamed, the persona identifies itself in turn with the folktale, fable and a riddle to act as an idiom to experience. In fact, ecocriticism in the poetry of Desmond Kharmawphlang operates chiefly in the form of a quest for roots through the cultural odyssey in traditional myths and folklores of the land. The poet, initiated into the world-creating dimensions of stories, finds in myths and folk-tales the glimmer of a dignified past in a radical contrast to the ignoble kind of existence amidst a mute, uncanny fear for self-amnesia under the perilous threats of Westernisation. The following excerpt from the poem Letter from Pahambir drives home such a conjecture:

The stories burn our memories like

A distant meteor searing

The unnamed gloom, by their light I examine

The great hurt I carry in my soul

For having denied my own,

(Kharmawphlang, 2009.L.52-56)

In short, the poets of the North East assume a problematic stance to disquieting experiences in the form of an ambivalence, love for nature with its paraphernalia of mythic rivers and magic hills with their ravines and deep gorges which permeates the poetic heart with a peace that manage to transmute the chaotic into a curative deliberation that seeks to fuse all disparate strands of experience such as the private and the public, hope and despair into an organic whole of lyrical utterance.

Taking cue from the epigraph, what seems to be important is to re-adjust the angle of vision for a glimpse of the twinkling stars of yester nights buried in the depth of the glaring daylight of the present day, to imagine sweet and sour!

Theoretically speaking, the conscious use of myth as a literary strategy by Indian English writers to lend an added dimension and depth to human experience subscribes to the emancipatory character of



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artistic search that corresponds much to Alex Aronson's transcendental opinion of Indian civilization and culture:

In any case, in a world of perpetual motion, India remains a perpetual becoming, a vast and protean sea of human improvisations on the great dance of time.⁸

2. NOTES

1. Qtd in Vyaghreswarudu, B. *Indian Writing in English*, P.13
2. Narayan's interview cited in Krishna Sen, *Critical Essays .on R. K. Narayan's The Guide*, p.132.
3. Narayan's interview cited in Krishna Sen, *Critical Essays .on R. K. Narayan's The Guide*, p.132,
4. Krishna Sen cites Bakhtin's definitions of chronotope in her study of Malgudi as a chronotope on the basis of a living intersection of regional and universal/human traits: "...Malgudi is more than a physical location - it also has a mythic dimension, which enables Narayan to invest his realistic stories with moral and metaphysical significance."(*Critical Essays on R. K. Narayan's The Guide*, p-153).
5. The Ratnakar myth pre-figures the mystique of transcendence. Ratnakar, a notorious dacoit, was the son of a saint called Chavan. Once the dacoit came across Narada, the sage who invoked Ratnakar to eschew the path of violence and sin so as to save his soul since the family for which the dacoit sacrificed his virtues, would never afford to share his sin. Awakened to sense by the sage's advice, Ratnakar underwent a strenuous meditation and incantation of 'Ram Naam' and eventually outgrew into a great hermit, 'Maharshi Valmiki' who composed *The Ramayana*. In Indian tradition, the Ratnakar story always implies a possibility, a hope for redemption for even the most erring soul.
6. The third stage of life as recommended by Indian philosophy that is characterised by a total retirement from worldly duties and responsibilities after a certain age.
7. It is a cardinal aspect of the Gandhian philosophy. 'Satya' means 'truth' and 'Agraha' stands for affinity for a thing (here truth). A follower of 'Satyagraha' is called 'Satyagrahi', with Gandhi as the ideal example. Generally, the term implies a relentless desire/quest for truth. Theoretically speaking, Satyagraha means - a firm and resolute stand to face till the end all the odds like exploitation, injustice and unholiness in order to reach the goal of protecting truth, justice, welfare and one's dharma. In addition to working as an agent of moral regeneration of the colonised nation, 'Satyagraha' as a policy was used by Gandhi to legitimise the anti-Colonial protest of India and claim freedom in the rhetoric of right and inheritance.
8. qtd in K.C.Baral, "Imaging India: Nation and Narration"(p.80).



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