

Revisiting Hindu Mythical Characters in Select Indian Fiction



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ABSTRACT

Myth means tradition and tradition constitutes a culture. Etymologically, the word ‘Myth’ is derived from the Greek word ‘Mythos’ meaning ‘tale of the people’ and ‘logy’ from ‘logos’ meaning speech so in all Mythology is defined as the sacred tales of any culture that is told by the people. The meaning of the English term ‘Myth’ is often misjudged from the Sanskrit word ‘Mithya’ but both has variant meanings. ‘Mithya’ means ‘a false notion’ whereas Myths are the Historical tales in narrative form having supernatural elements and whose authenticity on the bases of logic and science has not been certified but many people believe on them as they are the major part of their culture and tradition.

Many writers like Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* and Salman Rushdie in *Midnight’s Children* have illustrated Hindu deities in their fiction but they tried to give them a new dimension instead of representing them as it is. An Indo-Canadian writer, Shauna Singh Baldwin used them as a symbol in her fiction. This research paper aims to examine the different shades of the characters from Hindu mythology illustrated in the fiction of above mentioned writers. It also endeavours to explore the role of Hindu mythology in literature and how it is beneficial for the readers.

Keywords: History, Hindu Mythology, freedom struggle, Indian English Literature, Symbols

History is not just a study of past but it is also the base of our existence. Our history is the answer to those questions that our mind inquisitively probes on. There are plenty of mysterious questions whose answers we try to find on the pages of history. It has been written since the evolution of mankind but there are more ancient legendary tales without having any veracious proof and collectively they are known as Mythology. As there are many facets of history but one of the major aspects of it is Mythology and literature is an abetment to acknowledge more of them. There are many mythologies within the scope of knowledge around the world that people somehow tend to believe.

Mythology has its separate reserved place in literature and it is a vital source to know one’s culture. What combines History from Mythology; is the term ‘Past’ as both represents the past of a human being and so we may count myths as a part our history. Myths are valuable through the grounds of morality as they attempt to fetch us the life lessons by portraying various Gods and demons with the merits and demerits of good and evil respectively. Alan W. Watts defined myth in *Myth and Ritual in Christianity* in the following words:

“Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories – some no doubt fact and some fantasy which for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and the human life.”

There are a myriad number of mythologies all over the world like Greek Mythology, Roman Mythology, Hindu Mythology, Christian Mythology, Japanese Mythology and many more. Among the list of the oldest mythologies; the Ancient Greek Mythology is one of them. The tales are mostly related to the origin of the world and they are preserved in the works of Homer, Hesiod, Plutarch and Pausanias. Other than the Greek mythology, Hindu mythology also plays a significant role in the world of mythology and its vitality cannot be neglected. The Vedic Literature is the oldest text ever found in it. It consists of four Vedas (Rig veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda). There are some epic tales like Mahabharata and Ramayana are also remarkable. These ancient texts were written in Sanskrit language. The Mahabharata was narrated by Ved Vyasa and the Ramayana was narrated by Valmiki.

Literature is a facet to creativity and through it one may experience the fusion of reality, fiction and myth. It seems enchanting because it opens up the path of imagination which one cannot experience in reality. Like other arts, it is a way to learn and enjoy at the same time. There are numerous literatures written in various languages that widen up our imagination and increases our knowledge about variant myths. The Greek mythology has a great impact on literature and art and various writers have used the symbols from it to make their moral points more firm. For instance, Dante Alighieri in his *The Divine Comedy*, Edmund Spenser in his *Faire Queen* gave the reference of Greek Gods and Demons to confirm their notion in moral grounds, from Homer's *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey*, the earliest literary text of the Greek Mythology. Along with the Ancient Greek mythology, they also took some symbols from other mythologies. Myths of Adam and Eve, Jonah, Jupiter, Venus, Prometheus etc. have been deliberately used in literature whenever any writer has depicted the human corruption and on it; the hammer of God and his morality. Like this, there are numerous Indian English writers who wrote the fiction on the background of the Hindu mythology and some of them twisted the actions and deeds of their characters into modernity. Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Amish Tripathi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anand Neelkantan are few of them.

Raja Rao (1908-2006) is a renowned Indian English writer who received the Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960). He is mostly known for his first novel *Kanthapura* (1938) as this novel confirmed his place as a major Indian English writer. Based on the theme of moral and evil this story weaves freedom struggle in the background. It is a perfect blend of myth and history as from the history's point it mentions the Gandhian ideologies, caste system, untouchability during the Pre-Independent era, equating the freedom struggle as a war between the Gods and the demons. It is a highly symbolic novel dealing with two types of mythologies- Hindu Mythology; that is well-known to the people (the Ramayana and the Mahabharata) and Local Mythology; that is based on the supernatural tales of the village, 'Kanthapura'. Kenchamma is the local Goddess who is known as the protector of the village and the narrator Achakka, an old woman, narrated the story in the form of Sthala Purana (collection of texts that tells the tradition of Tamil Shiva temples or shrines). So Achakka narrated *Kanthapura* like Valmiki narrated the Ramayana. In this way, combining myth and reality, his novel is no less than a Purana.

Achakka as a narrator has provided Rao, a perfect opportunity to demonstrate his novel more like a Purana than a novel. Through her narration, Rao unified Man's action with Gods' during the British Empire.

Achakka compared Gandhi with Lord Rama, who would bring Sita back from Ravana. Here Sita is Swaraj (freedom) and Ravana is the British imperial power. When Gandhi went England to attend the second round table conference, she compared it with the exile of Lord Rama, who after his 14 years of exile brought Sita back in Ayodhya killing Ravana at the end-

“They say the Mahatma will go to the Red-Man’s country and he will get us Swaraj. He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatama. And we shall be all happy. And Rama will come back from exile and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain and Sita freed, he will come back with Sita on his right in the chariot of the air and brother Bharatha will go to meet them with the worshipped sandal of the master on his head. And as they enter Ayodhya, there will be a rain of flowers.” (p. 183)

Gandhi is also compared to Lord Krishna as Krishna killed the serpent Kaliya, so like this, the villagers hope that he would also slay down the British rule and set India free from the grab of slavery. Raja Rao substituted the mythical characters in such a manner that the character of the novel demonstrated their identity more firmly without losing their individuality. The novel is powerful in terms of emotion, reality, history and myth and Raja Rao did not leave any essence of ‘Indianness’ in it.

Like Raja Rao, a British Indian writer Salman Rushdie (19 June 1947) also tried to exhibit moral values depicting the war of good and evil but his way of projection is distinctive from Rao, as he gave a new dimension to his characters in the reference of the mythical characters. Rushdie’s second novel *Midnight’s Children* (1981) gave him much fame as he implied a complex phenomenon of magic realism in it. He won the Booker Prize in 1981 for this novel. Although he interwove his characters in the frame of various mythical characters but he gave them a new twist. The names of the characters are same like that of the mythical characters but most of the time their actions and deeds are opposite. Rushdie’s dexterity is clearly visible when he mingled imagination with myth while naming some of the Chapters and they seem quite mythical like “Many-headed Monsters, Snakes and Ladders, Revelations, How Saleem Achieved Purity, The Buddha, In the Sundarbans, Abaracadabra etc. The Chapter Many-headed Monsters reminds us of the ten-headed demon Ravana from the Hindu Epic Ramayana; who is a symbol of evil. In this novel also, it is a metaphor for those who are causing riots between the Hindus and the Muslims.

The story is about the children born at the midnight of independence and therefore they are blessed with various powers. Saleem is the protagonist of the novel. In the Hindu mythology, Parvati is a goddess and Lord Shiva is her spouse and here in the novel we would discover both the characters opposite to the Gods. Through the role of Parvati, who is repeatedly called as ‘the-witch’ in the novel, Rushdie twisted the mythical character Parvati giving her an effect of modernity. Despite her perfection in sorcery she was failed to gain the love of Saleem though she became his wife. But she also symbolizes the unity between the Hindus and the Muslims as she married Saleem. Her lover Shiva’s character is also complicatedly woven in terms of the qualities from Lord Shiva. His destructive and recreating nature perceived a match with Lord Shiva but he is also a cynical man who has done terrible crimes and impregnates many women including ‘Parvati-the witch’. Although the power of creation symbolizes Lord Shiva’s Lingam which stands for creativity and fertility but he

is not as generous as Lord Shiva is known to be. According to Saleem, Shiva is the shrewdest character as there is no evidence to detect his crimes:

“To be honest; I did not like Shiva. I disliked the roughness of his tongue, the crudity of his ideas; and I was beginning to suspect him of a string of terrible crimes – although I found it impossible to find any evidence in his thoughts....” (p. 226)

It is a metaphorical novel where Rushdie gave a proper space to each and every character to deal with the difficult situations according to their characteristics because they are human beings not Gods and they have flaws. He rendered some of the characters with the God-like merits and the Demon-like demerits.

Above mentioned writers used the qualities of some mythical characters to shape their own fictional characters but Shauna Singh Baldwin (1960), an Indo-Canadian writer didn't use myths as a background instead she gave few instances from the myths to express the situations and emotions of the characters. Although she is living in Canada but her faith in the Guru Granth Sahib still exists in the roots of her heart and it is the source to uplift her hope as she herself admitted in an interview by Deepa Kandaswamy published in *The Hindu*-

“The poetry of the 10 Gurus, Bhakti and Sufi saints in the Guru Granth Sahib never fails to uplift me.”

She is a feminist and by showing that how the society is subjugating women by narrating the tales from the Hindu mythologies, she clearly rejected the notion of male superiority and women ignominy. Her debut novel *What the Body Remembers* (1999) won her the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2000. It is knitted with the Partition theme where the leading character Roop's journey has been outlined. She is the second wife of Sardarji, after Satya who is childless and Sardarji married Roop in want of a child. Baldwin prudently manifested the situation of Roop comparing it with Sita and her Agni-Pariksha (fire test) with the injustice and subjugation she faced from the patriarchal society. She raised an issue that how the elders teach females to be silent by giving various instances from the mythologies. Like Goddess Sita every girl has to give Agni-Pariksha to prove her fidelity. Roop is a Sikh woman but her aunt used to teach her the Ramayana, and that's why she often compares her situation with Sita. She passed this Agni Pariksha many times but with the heart saying 'no'.

“Roop waits for him to ask her so she might say it, but he does not ask at all, he assumes she will want what he wants. Sardarji's suggestion is to assist her in learning his wishes, every woman is a Sita to her Ram, and what Ram wants, Sita will enjoy doing.” (p. 216)

Baldwin condemns the patriarchal society and put forward her staunch view point with the help of the story of Ramayana as she wanted her readers to learn from the past and not to repeat the same mistake in the present. In this way, like Rao and Rushdie, she also attempted to represent the moral values through the Hindu Mythology. The writer is sad analysing the end of the story of Ramayana and how people overshadow the whole story-

“No one asked the actors to act the rest of the Ramayan story: the story that did not end with Ram's homecoming and the celebrations of Diwali..... how Ram rejected Sita, innocent though

she was, because a mere washer man suggested that in her time as Ravan's hostage, Sita might have been impure." (p. 331)

Not only she used the sharp edge of her words with the help of the Hindu mythologies to put her perception about the stereotype society but she also depicted that how a helpless human always takes shelter of the God he believes on, whenever he has nowhere to go. Like Raja Rao in *Kanthapura*, she also used some local Indian mythologies in her third novel *The Selector of Souls* and through it she put forward her views on increasing female foeticide during 1990s. The novel begins with the birth of an unwanted girl child and her grandmother Damini is about to commit a crime by forcing her granddaughter to swallow tobacco with a heavy heart as she considers that her granddaughter shouldn't live in this hell where nobody wants her. For committing this blunder, she recalls a local God of the Himalayas, Lord Golunath who is known to be the Lord of Justice, for giving her strength to commit this horrible crime and to uplift the soul of the baby to some another world-

"Lord Golunath, you who bring justice: allow the merits of this deed to cancel any demerits. O spirits of the prît-lok, come and receive this atman, this jee become matter, that mistakenly entered this world." (p. 09)

What an irony is this that people for committing any serious crime, compare their situations and deeds to the Gods they have read about. Damini compares her deed with Lord Arjun who, according to the Hindu mythology killed his own cousins in the battle of Mahabharata. But his cousins were the evil souls and here that innocent infant was merely a soul just took birth on this earth. So it may be said that either she had half knowledge about the Mahabharata or she just wanted an excuse to commit the infanticide. Baldwin's main focus was to raise the issue of women subjugation and to demand equality and for this she took help of the various Hindu and local mythologies. In her fiction the most corrupt people or the one who is not a corrupt but has done a crime, are the one who pretends to teach morality lessons from the mythologies to the other characters that are indeed pure by their deeds. Either the characters are misinterpreting the mythical tales or the tales are somehow misguiding them. The role of Sita in the Ramayana is the one that our society always praises because of the misinterpretation that a woman should act according to her husband's will as Sita actually did what Lord Rama had ordered her but people forget that she is also the same Sita who after giving Agni-Pariksha, rejected her husband Rama and his Kingdom for her own individuality.

Many interpretations of myth are to be found in the literature of divergent cultures and some contemporary writers dealt with the theme of collaborating myth with reality but most of the time they endeavoured to stretch their characters in a new dimension rather than delineating their deeds as it is. The reason of it may be that in this Kaliyuga era human are not even acting like human then how could they be like the Gods or demigods having exceptional qualities. This is the reason that Salman Rushdie escaped to show any character that has no issue with his senses and depicted a Kaliyuga human rather than the God-like Humans. According to him-

"Kaliyuga is the losing throw in our national dice game, the worst of everything, the age when property gives a man rank; when wealth is equated with virtue; when passion becomes the soul bond between men and women, when falsehood brings success (is it any wonder in such a time, that I too have been confused about good and evil?" (p. 108)

So we may conclude that dealing with the mythologies taking variant perceptions and ideas would beautify literature in the terms of aestheticism and reality. It is a change for better as literature is a vision of reality, doesn't matter whether it is fiction or non-fiction; it has an essence of reality in every aspect of life. But now in this Kaliyuga Era, most of the people have become morally corrupt and these myths are culturally losing their grip from humanism.

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