

UNRAVELING MYTHS AND THEIR ORIGIN IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF EUGENE O NEILL AND GIRISH KARNAD

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Abstract

The present paper maps the origin of Myths, Mythopoeia and legend and how they have been used by both the playwrights in their respective works. Myths have helped various writers to add more meaning to their work. Usage of Myth helps the characters to nail themselves to their past in these difficult times. The present endeavor is directed to the study of myths in the plays of O'Neill and Karnad. We hope that it would contribute to a better understanding of the intricacies of their dramatic art in explaining the vital motives that govern human action. The myths in the plays are seen as shorn of their traditional and conceptual connotations, and are studied in the larger perspective of the universal importance conveying specific human experience.

Key words: Myths, Mythopoeia and legend.

Myths have fascinated human mind from times immemorial as a central issue in her/his efforts to define meaning of religion, culture and history by providing new life to art and literature, and have remained as the motivating force behind his artistic explorations. The word "myth" is derived from the Greek word 'mythos' which means an ancient traditional story of gods or heroes. In common parlance, a myth is a tale about Gods, supernatural beings and heroes. It is traditional which means that it was transmitted orally for many ages. No single definition of myth was ever reached, and it's a well problem. Myths, for example, might be legends concerning long-ago events that have a lasting impact on a community's identity. In those other words, a "myth" might also be a fiction or a false act of speech, yet it is politically convincing. (Abiodun, 1989)

The Hellenistic term mythopoeia means the creation of myths. Authors often use this kind of narrative whenever they want to revisit an old legend as well as create a new one. During the 1930s, the poem Mythopoeia by JRR Tolkien prompted the word "mythopoeia" to be coined. Classic mythological ideas as well as archetypes are integrated into writing by the authors of this subgenre. The act of generating such tales is known as mythopoeia. C. S. Lewis, Robert W. Chambers, H.P. Lovecraft, George MacDonald, as well as Lord Dunsany are notable mythopoeic authors. Only a few literary works attain the deep self-referentiality and aim of mythopoeia, regarding the ubiquity of mythical ideas. Instead of being passed down from generation to generation via oral tradition, it is created by a single author or a small group of collaborators in a very short period of time.

However, Mythopoeia, on either hand, aims at bringing myth to modern readers by replicating as well as combining real-world myth rather than conjuring complicated worlds with well-known histories, geographies, as well as natural laws. There has been a lengthy effort by the writers to build up an interesting mythology. Despite the fact that it is an

analytical and in-depth storey, the storyline is also motivated by a larger plan that's also enacted by characters in the storey. To convey human feelings and experiences, storytelling relies heavily on myths, which may be found in our hearts and minds. It is common for works in this genre to go deep into the author's psyche & reveal the immense landscapes with legions myriad characters who fight for dominance inside the author's subconsciousness.

It is a legendary or a traditional story which is usually andro-centric which may not be supported by facts or real explanations. They primarily concentrate on demigods or deities, and describe rites, practices, and natural phenomenon and the hero who will have divine qualities but will always have a status inferior to Gods but will have qualities that will put them at a higher pedestal from the sapiens. Characteristically, a myth involves historical and gothic elements. There are many types of myths, such as classic myths, religious myths, and modern myths.(Fall, 1971)

Classical myths are inspired by the Greek and Roman myths and are a product of how they are received by the different cultures. They are generally made popular by the oral traditions. Religious myths under this approach are traditional such as the biblical ones which are read symbolically rather than literally. Myths are an important element of religion and consist of concepts which are important to certain concepts. Modern myths are created by people all around the world to rework or embroider the existing ones. They originated as artistic creation, although their creators may have drawn from earlier myths. Modern mythical superheroes like Superman will have the good qualities of mythical heroes along with supernatural powers. They are mostly ancient, and they ruled the world during a time when science, philosophy, as well as technology were less exact; myths were used to explain natural events and describe rites as well as ceremonies to the general public.(Amuta, 1983)

The distinctions between myth, legend, and folklore are also notable. As a rule, myths and legends are not quite the same thing if the hero is a human. Folktales are stories concerning supernatural beings that aren't part of a bigger body of mythology. A myth, as previously said, has paranormal components. The majority of the time, myths are thought of as imaginative stories told to children or adults as a kind of amusement or solace in the midst of puzzling natural phenomena. Indian myths are considered as classical myths as well as religious. There are similarities between the Indian Gods and the Hellenistic Gods like Indra and Zeus. The concept of Holy Trinity is found in the Greek myths in the form of Zeus, Hades and Poseidon, in Bible it is the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost and in Hinduism it is Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh.

Mythopoeic is something in which man still persists to find meaning and content of his experience. The myths afford the artist both the necessary artistic control to explore his subject and means of generalization. Though differing at points, these myths contribute to a unified vision, testify the facts and experience of life, and serve as viable framework dramatizing modern dilemmas and conflicts implicit in contemporary situations.

Writers have used myths and symbols evolved through human experience. Like the western dramatists e.g Luigi Pirandello, Jean Giraudoux, Jean Anouilh and Jean Paul Sartre among others, modern American dramatists led by Eugene O' Neill sought to appease their dramatic quests with the perennial meanings as found in myths and symbols and interwove them extensively in the themes of their drama.

Eugene Eugene O' Neill the paterfamilias of modern American drama has generated a lot of interest. He was a progenitor of avant- grade modern drama in America. By endowing his plays with a new urgency and seriousness almost equal to the European dramatists of

the early 20th century he gave a new impetus to the American drama enlarging its scope for its thematic content and theatrical innovations. Before him the American stage was awash with genteel, sentimental comedies of inane merit based on standardized, flamboyant and familiar themes. He pioneered the drama of serious realism with uncompromising honesty.

The plays of Eugene O' Neill were cardio grams of the impatient heart in which he charred the thwarted dreams and elusive hopes of his characters , the defeated lives and tormented lives whom fate rendered unrealized . He opened up the American stage to a range of lives and occupation outside the familiar middle class quotidian experience. He dislodged the contemporary American dramatic practices with rigor; rebelling against the shibboleths and provided new substance to his audacious experiments exposing drama to new vistas of freedom with his use of natural symbols, chorus , crowds and their choreographic movements ,asides, masks and interior monologue in his plays. He was offered bouquets of critical encomiums and accolades as well as lashed with vituperative tirades. There is an emotional honesty and sincerity of effort in his works. Through his use of over brimming compassion, sweep of sympathy and richness and intensity of the themes he achieves an unconventional style of using myths in his drama.

However, the use of myths, archetypal patterns, and symbols in the themes of O'Neill's plays has not been given an unbiased, balanced and comprehensive assessment, though there have been a few fragmented attempts to study myths in his plays. By and large the entire corpus of his plays has not been subject to such a magnified treatment. His plays echo with mythical patterns and allusions, for he saw in myths an indispensable means of conveying deeper meaning. Though he did not subscribe to the norms of the French Literary Movement which saw life in terms of myths; nevertheless, he imbued his plays with myths. Like the romantics he used archetypal symbols, ritual patterns of myths to express the elemental appetites, passions and such forces as affect man's behaviour in a given circumstance. He used myths to describe basic urges and inexplicable forces at work in a particular social milieu. The myths operate at various experimental levels in the plays even though there is no conscious effort made by the playwright to provide the myths to play their specific roles in the interpretation of subterranean human cravings.

Ostensibly, the stress is on the study of myths from earlier times- the ancient, classical, Christian- the Biblical and archetypal patterns, and the contemporary American myths and legends which had a greater bearing upon Eugene O'Neill's plays. It is an attempt to explore his mythopoetic ability in his plays which gave him a pre-eminent position as the most significant contemporary American playwright of international renown to emerge between the Wars. It is our endeavour to establish his supremacy as a dramatic artist who gave new dimensions to modern tragedy with his adroit use of myths and symbols, and, thus, served as a link between the ancient classical and the modern tragedy by providing continuity, vitality and perspicacity which the Twentieth century tragic drama lamentably lacked.

Eugene O'Neill created his own myths out of the cultural attitudes of contemporary American society as reflected in his plays in the archetypal Forms such as the myth of American Dream, of Innocence and the Fall, the Ednic myth or the Quest. Thomas E. Porter examined the American plays in the light of cultural milieu to discern structures and patterns created by fixed cultural attitudes, recurrent images as those of sub—urbia or small town, or stereotypes like salesman (Porter, 1969).

Myth assimilates and crystallizes tradition and cultural experiences of a society into a permanent system of values in a higher imaginative form. In this sense, it becomes a cultural product generally, as Haberman puts it, "dreaming soul of the race telling its

story"(Haberman, 1967). Culture itself a primarily changing and the continuous process, accommodates with itself the changing realities of life through the dialectics of thesis, antitheses and synthesis. Thus, myth becomes a kind of permanent foil, a predicament and pervading idealization of life against the current realities of an advancing culture.

The Hairy Ape is a play which considers the strain of a mighty stoker named Yank. The struggle is with himself, his own past and his attempt to belong. The Ednic myth of America as a paradise is one of such cultural beliefs and attitudes. O'Neill used it in his play *The Hairy Ape* by adopting it negatively because of the conflict between the weariness of actual life and the ideal of paradise. He interpreted the contemporary experience in terms of waste land, corruption and de—generation. Contrary to the writers' exalted tone about American life and values as inherited perfeelion of Eden, he viewed that the innocent American Adam and his ideal milieu were figments of imagination. To quote David Madden, American novelist and critic:

"It appears there are two major American Dream myths: the Old Testament idea of a Paradise hopelessly lost; followed by endless nightmare sufferings and New Testament's idea of a Paradise that a new American Adam will eventually regain. Most serious fiction is slanted against the New Testament vision, hope for clear vision lies in the ambiguous area between Paradise Los? and Paradise Regained".(Madden, 1970)

The myth of American dream emerged out of American myth of paradise. The Ednic myth becomes a theological metaphor of man's relation to God. Its significant meaning concerns moral, cultural and psychological life of America. The Arcadia theme originated out of it in the traditional belief that nature has been a constant source of pleasure and bounty, and a symbol of perfect life.

O'Neill's plays deliberately use Greek influences. He tried to adapt the Greek concept of fate into modern language. The fact that two of O'Neill's best tragedies, *Desire Under the Elms* as well as *Mourning Becomes Electra*, make explicit use of Greek mythology in their storey structure shows how deeply influenced by Greek tragedy he had been in the use of symbols and myths in modern drama. He has also performed the superb act, of dispensing with the supernaturalism of Greek tragedy by replacing it with determinism to render the behavioural pattern acceptable. The resultant effect is to render the play *Desire under the Elms*, cohere with the rationalistic and scientific temper of the age. The aim is to administer justice, according to the deeds of the character. *Desire Under Elms* is a modern version of an ancient story of Hippolytis. It portrays the affairs of a stepmother with her stepson.

The Phaedra Hippolytus myth is more consciously planted in the play which had previously been used by Euripides in 'Hippolytus' and the Racine in 'Phaedra'. The basic theme of these plays is the same i.e. the uncertain nature of man in relation to the power of terrifying forces not only beyond his control but beyond the reach of his understanding. But O'Neill's use of the mythic properties is more in modernistic vein where Dionysion passions are still dominating, while the sources of passion and love remain mysterious.(Murray & Bowman, 1987)O'Neill diverged from the original mythic source. In the Greek myth Theseus has returned with young wife Phaedra, who is immediately fascinated by her step-son Hippolytus. In this play Ephraim Cabot has brought a young wife Abbie who is attracted by Eben. But Eben is not as chaste as Hippolytus who repulsed his mother's advances.

The autobiographical elements grew in the plays written by him. He chose for his plays subjects like social injustice and conflict of races. As Joseph Wood Krutch, an American naturalist, conservationist, writer, and critic has pointed out: "*O'Neill's life has been largely*

the story of his innumerable plays, all written with passionate and absorbing faith in the importance of the task the author has set for himself". (Krutch, 1954) The conflict of capital and labour and the problem of man versus machine also attracted his attention. He was preoccupied with the theme of fate in a society which suffers from spiritual sterility which was beautifully captured in *The Great God Brown* and *The Hairy Ape*. O'Neill attempts to suggest remedies for the rudderless humanity. In *The Great God Brown*, the solution lies in the integration of split personalities. O'Neill has sought to exhibit man's aspirations in a vibrant lyrical style. The device of wearing a mask is central to the action. There is the opposition of the mask and the face in the play. O'Neill endowed the plot, character, theme and dialogue with symbolic and mythical properties. The names and the dramatis personae suggest mystical and mythical patterns. He used mythical names to add richness, suggestively and depth. The name of Dion Anthony is symbolic and suggestive. The play showcased the fall of man and the commercial ills faced due to progress.

After 1936, when the downturn and its associated ideologies swept the theatre, O'Neill's creativity begins to decline. Owing to commercialism's numbing effect on creativity, no powerful impulses ever crossed his mind. For many people, *The Iceman Cometh* was an eye-opening glimpse at how easily we can be fooled. An extended work of fiction depicting the tortured and ego family life of the protagonist was released many years later. However, he succumbed to Parkinson's disease & died in 1953, leaving behind a legacy of the first American dramatist to gain a solid international following. Insofar as current theatrical techniques are concerned, O'Neill's concerns are ageless. This man had to cope with a tragedy that was outside of the natural course of events. For his contributions to a realm of theatre, he is always recognised.

The American drama prior to Eugene O' Neill was detached from life and culture, though some plays were written in naturalistic and realistic vein. It sought to establish a relationship between the native drama and the culture as embodied in a myth to emphasize the representation and American character of drama after 1920. He distinctly displayed the qualities of a mythopoeist which were to leave a mark, though four decades later, on the newly independent Indian subcontinent writers who were still yearning for a dramatic form of self expression that could help them discern the present with their feet firmly grounded in the mythical and enticing past.

GirishKarnad, an Indian dramatist, drew on the both classic and new sources. It's no surprise that actor and filmmaker GirishKarnad has produced fourteen plays in his native Kannada, such as the critically acclaimed *Yayati* and the award-winning *Agni Mattu Male* as well as *Taledanda*. As a consequence of his contributions, he has been recognised with some of India's highest honours and accolades, such as the *Padma Bhushan* and thus the *Padma Shri*, and the *Jnanpith* in 1998 for his works in Kannada.

Like the world drama even Indian drama was heavily seeped into realism .Girish Karnad was strictly against blatant copying of the west "living room" culture into Indian plays. He places a lot of importance on the Indian kitchen as the central area of conversation as opposed to the western drawing/living room. In his speech delivered at *Meet the Author* programme organized by *SahityaAkademi* and the *Indian International Centre* in 1988 titled "Acrobating between the Traditional and the Modern " he said "*All the naturalistic plays in West take place in the drawing room...the living room of the house is the central point for the individual ...everything happens in the living room ...not only in theater but in society itself, it is where a person belongs. But in India living room is really*

a place where you meet guests and give them tea...The family really meets inside the kitchen or talks in the kitchen or in the eating place.”(KARNAD, 1989)

While theatre experimented with newer forms, Indian drama in English performed its archaic form for many years. The reason being Indian audience not eager to enjoy theatre especially, English plays. Since, Indian living room was a site of formal cordiality. Therefore, Girish Karnad tried to break this geography of living room by giving it an Indian touch thereby revolutionizing Indian theater and freeing it from the clutches of the west. VinayDharwadker, Assistant Professor, University of Oklahoma, is of the opinion that post independence era led to a rise in the search of a common Folk culture with which people could find their bearing and feel comfortable in expressing themselves. He said “*Post 1960’s Indian drama was Anti-realistic as opposed to realistic European drama of Ibsen, Shaw or Chekhov.*” (Dharwadker, 1994)

Myth and folklore have long been a staple of Indian theatre, but GirishKarnad was the first to exploit them effectively. Karnad was an outspoken opponent of Hindu nationalism and the rise of religious fanaticism in India. He was particularly concerned with the political use of mythology. He even declares his debt to myths in his Prologue to *Yayati*, "Our play this night deals with an ancient myth. However I must stress that it is not a 'mythological' tale. What a terrible fate! The aim of mythology is to elicit feelings of love in the listener." (Girish, 1994)

Karnad’s hallmark has been his knack to bring out the apt myths from the past and place them in the contemporary scenario. As it has been noted by PremaNandkumar, a leading literary critic, “*Karnads creative genius lies in taking up fragments of historical-legendary experience and fusing them into forceful statement..Three Plays is certainly a gift for all seasons*” (Nandakumar, 1995)

Karnad grew up watching three kinds of theatre namely, The Company Natak, Yakshagana and the Western theater. Having been exposed to such a wide array of performances he wrote his plays in the form of the Company Natak. Initially he did not want to be a dramatist but a poet. But, talking candidly in a speech delivered at *Meet the Author* programme organized by SahityaAkademi and the Indian International Centre in 1988 titled “Acrobating between the Traditional and the Modern” he confessed that he was surprised to find himself writing a myth based play in Kannada. The first play that Karnad wrote was based on a Mahabharata myth because personally he found himself in a predicament that could best be explained via it. Coming from a traditional middle class family and going abroad with a heavy weight of familial expectations got him writing about *Yayati*. (GIRISH, 1989)

Karnad acknowledged this fact, “*My generation was the first to come of age after India became independent of British rule. It therefore had to face a situation in which tensions implicit until then had come out in the open and demanded to be resolved without apologia or self-justification: tensions between the cultural past of the country and its colonial past, between the attractions of Western modes of thought and our own traditions, and finally between the various visions of the future that opened up once the common cause of political freedom was achieved. This is the historical context that gave rise to my plays and those of my contemporaries.*” (Girish, 1994). R.K. Dhawan, Indian writer, editor and critic examines the impact of contemporary socio-cultural and literaray milieu: “*Karnad was fascinated by the traditional plays; nonetheless the Western playwrights that he read*

during his college days opened up for him a new world of magical possibilities”(Dhawan, 2009)

Karnad came from a close knit family and being the first one to go abroad for higher studies burdened him so much that he turned to writing a play and that too in the language of his childhood, Kannada. Born to Konkani, fostered in Kannada, instructed in English and refined in Marathi and Hindi, Karnad handled all of them with ease but preferred to do this creative writing in Kannada. Kannada was his language of choice by way of which he showcased the present with the kaleidoscope of the past. He discovered from KirtinathKurtkoti's background of Kannada literature that no Indian writer had addressed Indian history in the same manner that Shakespeare or Brecht had. Kannada theatre was able to flourish in Karnad's hospitable atmosphere because to her first-hand experience on stage and his mastery in dramatic style and approach, according to KirtinathKurtkoti inside the introduction to his play Hayavadan. (Girish, 1994)

Karnad's literary exercise had contacts with the living age and stage. He sought to find and define 'Indianness' in drama and brought to light the drama that embodied traditions of India. His plays although drew heavily from the rich sources of myths and folklore, however they were thoroughly modern in spirit and outlook. They concealed a rare sophistication and sensibility that resonated not only in the narratives but also with the modern man whose gradual erosion of ethics and moralities were unabashedly portrayed in his plays.

GirishKarnad's plays grappled with the duality of an individual personality. The first one is the social façade that is worn for the world to see and the other is the personal psyche, the real one. The characters yearned for perfection and completeness in the complex world of tangled relationships. King Yayati wanted eternal youth and made his own son sacrifice his youth so as to enjoy a life of unbridled debauchery. Padmini wanted best of the head and heart so she transposed the heads of Kapila and Devdatta to find her complete man. Rani only yearned for a lovable husband whose replacement she found a snake. *Yayati* reworks a Mahabharata myth and explores identity quest, patriarchal dominance and the subaltern concerns. He has beautifully designed the characters of Yayati, Puru, Chitrlekha, Devayani and Sharmistha in a trap of situations. The exchange of age and the question of responsibility of a son express the state of predicaments of these characters that are constantly in search for their identity. As a result, they find themselves in the absurdist situations which make them lonely, estranged, rootless, helpless and stranger to their society.

Karnad was a chameleon, flitting back and forth between old and the new. His plays were filled with biplanes of questions as well as eruptions of rage. He dealt with the important issue of who he was. The plays of Karnad had successfully demonstrated how indigenous issues, characters, languages, and Folk and Natak Company customs could rejuvenate Indian English theatre and decolonize Indian English drama. "If Indian English drama wishes to go forward, it must first return to its roots in the rich tradition of ancient Indian drama, both in Sanskrit as well as folk drama in Prakrits," said M. K. Naik a well-known scholar of Indian literature in English, "that is, only a purposeful return to its own origins in the rich tradition of ancient Indian drama can help it shed its lean and pale look, increase its artistic haemoglobin count, and make it cease to be the (Naik, 1995)Karnad emerged as a living legend in the contemporary Indian English drama.

Conclusion

The paper therefore helps to highlight how myths have found their way into the art of storytelling and acting. Writers have since time immemorial found the answers they have been desperately seeking in these although ancient but forever new myths. Looking at the dramatic oeuvre of both the playwrights it is quite discernable that they both used myths in their plays to showcase the contemporary problems with the veil of antiquity. This helped them explore the uncharted waters in their respective countries and also add layers of meaning to their work. O'Neill and Karnad were separated by continents and time frame but were looking for dramatic techniques that would help explain human psyche in a better way thereby making Myths as a perfect vehicle for their expression.

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