ABSTRACT

Myths have always been a great source of inspiration for creative writers as they are a storehouse of several themes that fascinate both the writers and readers. In the hands of such writers, there is an inherent promise that myths are considered forms of literary appreciation and knowledge. As societies and cultures undergo several transformations, several interpretations of myths too emerge. Sometimes, the hidden meanings in the mythical stories are brought out in the open through these interpretations, and sometimes, new knowledge regarding a particular society or culture is highlighted. This process of reclaiming and recreating myths happens at the cost of demythification. Such demythification takes place especially when the mythical situations and characters are placed in a modern context to highlight the contemporary human experience. Though the myths are far displaced from the contemporary times, they are found to have a cultural relevance and a social significance.

The main contention of my thesis is that myths are given a new role to suit the needs of the contemporary times. They are given a new life by the writers thus ensuring that they are not easily relegated to the position of a relic. At the same time, the myths are found to live precisely because they help each generation to understand itself better. It has been said that a real book reads us, and myths as books whether they repeat, adapt or transform the original myths, are seen to provide us greater clarity about our own situation. This thesis is based on the assumption that any creative writing, including those based on myths, is an examination and evaluation of ideas current at that time, e.g. the idea of liberty in a time of struggle for freedom, the idea of feminism or postcolonialism or globalization in the present times. This thesis explores the several areas of treatments
of myths by the Indian writers, with respect to the postcolonial standpoint taken in a broad sense and also the feminist and subaltern stance. To achieve this, the thesis first investigates several aspects of the theories about myths, myth criticism, postcolonial criticism and its incorporation into myth criticism and later takes up nine Indian novels as examples to prove that postcolonial criticism and myth criticism complement each other for a better reading and interpretation of the novels.

The thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter One, "Introduction", introduces the concept of myths, their origin, functions, nature and their characteristic features, and the nine varieties of myths presented or exploited in literature. This is followed by an account on how myths are a fascination to the Indian writers and then a chapter-wise summary of the whole thesis and finally the argument of the thesis.

Chapter Two, "Myth and Myth Criticism" focuses first on the several definitions of myth and how the definitions have changed along with the inclusions of several other disciplines like anthropology, sociology, psychology etc. Secondly, a historical survey of myth-studies is attempted, which starts with the Greeks during fifth century B.C. who considered myths as describing events that were unlikely and illogical; later during the Middle Ages, myths were treated as allegories; during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, myths were treated as profound truths; nature mythologists treated myths as pictures of nature and gods as personifications of heavenly bodies; the ritual theorists focused on myths as oral narratives to be associated with religious rituals; the social force theorists studied the function of myths of a particular society; with the advent of psychoanalysis, myths were interpreted in the form of symbols and archetypes; the structuralist theory emphasized the idea that myths transmit information through a
structure, and a few more theories are discussed that were prevalent but not as popular or convincing as the ones discussed above. Thirdly, the idea that myth-studies have become a highly interdisciplinary phenomenon is shown by indicating the special bond that myth shares with disciplines like history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, astronomy, astrology, biology, geology, music, fine arts, magic, and literature. Fourthly, the theory and practice of myth criticism are discussed with special reference to myth critics like Vico, Joseph Campbell, Francis Fergusson, Carl Jung, Maud Bodkin, Leslie Fiedler, Philip Wheelwright, and Northrop Frye. There is also a mention of the acceptance and critiques of myth criticism and the bond that myth criticism shares with other schools of criticism.

Chapter Three, “Postcolonial Criticism and its Incorporation into Myth Criticism” first introduces the term ‘postcolonial’ and its related concepts like Otherness, Orient, resistance, hybridity, ambivalence, nationhood, national allegory, cultural identity and the theme of loss. The important contributions of Said, Homi Bhabha, Gramsci, Spivak, Renan, Fanon, Jameson etc. to the theory are also discussed. The development of the postcolonial literatures is also discussed here. Finally, to demonstrate that postcolonial criticism and myth criticism provide a better insight into the reading of a text, the following examples are taken: Mangai’s Tamil play Pani-t-Thee (“Frozen Fire”), Tennyson’s poem ‘Ulysses’, Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn and Avadhesh Kumar Singh’s criticism of Kalidasa’s Abhigyanshakuntalam.

Chapters Four and Five, “Critical Analyses of the Novels in Relation to their Use of Myth – 1&2” analyse the following Indian novels for their treatment of myth with respect to all its coordinates that include the postcolonial and the feminist standpoints:

Chapter Six, “Conclusion” provides details of several other genres of literature that explore myth at the cost of demythification. Irawati Karve’s *Yuganta*, and Gurcharan Das’ *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* provide meaningful insights into the *Mahabharata* and its failings, gaps and silences with regard to dharma. The example of Romila Thapar’s *Sakuntala*, is taken to show how myths go through a change of meaning according to successive times. Bhisham Sahni’s *Madhavi* and Mahasweta Devi’s “Draupadi” are also studied in this context. Myths possess the qualities of timelessness as well as “timeliness” (if we can coin the word), that they lead an immortal life precisely because they speak to each passing generation with its own specific issues and dilemmas.