CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Human beings were curious about the how’s and why’s of the universe even before the advent of science and this curiosity led them to answers in the form of stories which later became mythical stories. Stories are about people/beings and their interaction and so they had a dramatic plot. The existence of Gods enhanced the dramatic quality of the myths. In fact, the first few definitions of myth linked it to the Gods; later with the advent of anthropology, the definitions changed according to the circumstance and the studies. Percy S. Cohen, in his essay entitled “Theories of Myth” (1969) delineated the characteristics of myth: one, “myth is a narrative of events, the narrative has a sacred quality, the sacred communication is made in symbolic form, at least some of the events and objects which occur in the myth neither occur nor exist in the world other than that of myth itself and the narrative refers in dramatic form to origins or transformations”, two, “myth is an explanation, of events that take place at a certain stage in the development of human society and culture” (Cohen 34). Myths, according to him also performed several linked functions, for instance, the social and the psychological, that is, the link between what is perceived and available and the primordial sense of a deeper level of reality (Cohen 50). George Schopflin in his essay entitled “The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths” (1997) explained: “Myth can be an instrument of identity transfer. It enables a new identity to be superimposed on an older one, so that the collectivity sustains itself by creating an identity homogeneous enough to let it live with […]” (Schopflin 208).
The origin of myths is still a mystery, but the mythmakers might have used any subject available at hand to create their myths. Either, they would have assembled the materials that were immediately perceived or they would have drawn in the material from some hidden places like the symbols and images from the deepest human minds or the repressed ones from the unconscious. The ancient Greeks were a lively, imaginative people with great literary talents and they made up some of the most fascinating tales. They called them ‘mythos’ which meant a ‘tale’ or a ‘story’. However, with the transformations in the cultural beliefs and practices of the world, several changes could be perceived in the idea of myth. Since the Greeks considered Gods superior beings and superior controllers of natural forces, it was reasonable to treat them with care, which meant the several sacrifices done to appease them, beautiful temples built for them and songs composed to praise them. Thus grew religion. Stars and planets were named after the characters in the myths, they told stories of ancestors whom they made the sons of the various Gods and Goddesses, and they even named their children after these Gods. However, with the advent of Christianity, the old Greek and Roman Gods became less commonly known, but were not erased completely from the memory. They were taken up or re-created again to suit a purpose or to perform a function.

However, for whatever reasons the myths were originally invented, subsequently they were used as a vehicle to communicate or express a number of things for which they were perhaps never intended. Sometimes, myths were used as an instrument for the rejection of responsibility, for the refusal to admit error, for the willingness to acknowledge that a particular event or set of events is likely to violate the society’s laws or even morality. However, when a myth is demythologized, it ceases to be about the
world and expresses the human experience of the world. It would no longer be an explanation, but an expression of the feelings undergone by a particular human being or a country. It becomes universal and depicts the human condition. It would have this quality of timelessness attached with it. It can either simplify complexity or complicate simplicity. It can also play a role in the maintenance of memory. New waves of interpretations follow with the process of demythologization. Myths, in order to remain alive, need to be metamorphosed in relation to the contemporary times and culture. Thus, we have several novelists, dramatists and poets who through their ingenious use of myths have constructed a link between the past and the present and between different ages and cultures. The critics analyze and find parallels between the mythical characters and their modern counterparts in literature; at once, we have a mythical Arjuna and a modern-day Arjun. By demythologization, myths acquire different forms and shades and are made relevant and meaningful to the contemporary times and contexts. Thus, myths are never fossilized. The never-to-be-forgotten heritage of stories still remains a considerable part of our literature and life. A close relationship between a community and its mythology is evident in the transmission of these mythical stories from one generation to another, a sort of cultural inheritance. In addition, during this transmission, some details may either be added to it or subtracted from it and a completely new range of presentations is available to the readers. Thus, myths are necessarily a fundamental element in human beings’ cultural life.

George Schopflin gives an account of the nine varieties of myths that are prevalent in the world of literature:
a) Myths of territory: a particular territory as a sacred space; a nation that has discovered itself; its purity safeguarded; its virtue best preserved before contact with aliens; its means of cultural reproduction kept safe from outsiders; e.g. Israel or other fundamentalist communities.

b) Myths of redemption and suffering: a nation by reason of its sorrowful history is undergoing or has undergone a process of expiating its sins and will be redeemed or may itself redeem the world; they are myths of powerlessness and compensation for that powerlessness; they claim a moral superiority for having suffered; especially found in the Christian doctrine—"it was the will of God".

c) Myths of unjust treatment: a particular community has been singled out for special negative treatment; the group has suffered; it is their fate; here one can notice the strong motif of helplessness; e.g. Hindu myths about Sita or Sakuntala, now being treated as myths of women's helplessness.

d) Myths of election and civilizing mission: the nation has been entrusted to perform some special mission as it is endowed with unique virtues; this myth legitimates an assumption of moral and cultural superiority to all competitors and rivals and requires them to recognize one's unique moral worth; during World War II, for example, the Allies saw themselves as St. George fighting the dragon (Germans and the Axis powers); all colonizing missions are based on some such myth.

e) Myths of military valour: these myths give importance to a collectivity because they have performed deeds of military valour; this is closely tied to
the idea of insurrection or revolution; the group finds the truest expression of its essence by rising against intolerable tyranny; sometimes they characterize a particular regime as tyrannical and justify mass violence against it in the form of force as an instrument of change; the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, for example, projects itself as a modern Shivaji fighting hostile alien cultures.

f) Myths of rebirth and renewal: Christian themes of rebirth and the Second Coming are relevant here; that is, the present is tainted, it must be cleansed and through that purgation a better world can be created; the past is unacceptable and so the group must distance itself from it; at the same time, there is hope for a better world if the renewal takes place; for instance, the phoenix myth.

g) Myths of foundation: every group, political system or every human endeavour has to make a start and seek to mark that by some special act which is accorded mythic qualities; the message is that afterwards everything will be different, in the sense, better and that the newly founded system has dispensed with whatever made the old a liability; e.g. the Indian Independence Movement was often visualized as a struggle to free an enslaved mother, Bharat Mata.

h) Myths of ethnogenesis and antiquity: these myths answer the question of where we are from in our collective existence; e.g., one of the stages in the Black American movement was to trace the historical and mythical connection of the Blacks to native African communities and myths.
i) Myths of kinship and shared descent: linked to the idea of the organic nature of the ethnic group, to the concept of nation as family and thus to the exclusion of ethnic aliens; for instance, the myths of racial superiority or inferiority; the myth imposes a well-defined set of moral propositions on a particular group, usually a group speaking the same language that is in the process of becoming a nation; e.g. the quest for identity mentioned in (h) above. (Schopflin 213-218; examples added)

Most of these myths are interconnected, sometimes they overlap and sometimes they are contradictory too. However, their major function is to construct coherence, to safeguard the integrity of the group and to simplify the collective world, that is, individuals should be allowed to construct their own identities as individuals and simultaneously as members of a community. Different myths receive emphasis at different times to cope with different challenges.

Myths have always held a fascination to the Indian mind. The vast ocean of Indian myths provides several layers of comfort to the Indian mind. They are a way of life for the Indians. They are a support system for the various happenings in life. They cannot be ignored even if they are not considered; such is the dominant role of myths in the Indian society. They continue their existence in the midst of political, social, cultural or even personal vicissitudes. The Indian authors have carefully observed this and they have used it to their advantage in their writings. They create a real situation using the imaginary situation of the past, as there has been a common understanding that myths belong to the realm of imagination usually, opposed to the world of reality. Sometimes, myths also have the capacity to order as well as liberate. This happens because human
beings have this need to both order and escape, a binary opposition that suggests that boundaries should be created and yet there is this underlying need to find ways to transgress them. Several instances from the *Mahabharata* prove this idea. Krishna, who preaches *dharma*, in fact, uses the most dishonest ways to win the war, for instance, to kill Bhishma, Shikhandi was used because it was a known truth that Bhishma would not fight or even raise a weapon against a woman, Drona was killed when he was stunned by the deliberate false news of his son’s death, Kama was killed when he was unarmed which is completely against the code of chivalry during a war, and Duryodhana was hit at his weakest point, that is, his thigh. Such episodes are often cited to authenticate an expedient view that ends justify means. These may be simplistic instances of popular uses of myth, but creative writers have adopted, adapted, retold or transformed myths to explore much more complex issues of interpersonal, cultural and even political relationships.

To understand a myth as myth is to perceive it in terms of all its variables, that is, the time, space, events, personages, drama and the symbols accorded to it. This thesis explores the treatment of myth with all these variables in mind. It also includes the postcolonial as an inherent variable, though in a much broader sense, in the analysis of the selected novels. In other words, myth and the postcolonial complement each other in the analyses. A navigation into my chapters will explain the procedure I have followed.

Firstly, theories about myth and the theory and practice of myth criticism are discussed in the next chapter (Chapter Two). Here, the various definitions of myth and the transformations in these definitions due to the differences in time and culture are explained. Though the definition of myth starts with as a story or a moral tale, later, it
broadens with the inclusions of various studies in the fields of anthropology, psychology, and aesthetics. A historical survey of myth-studies is attempted next. Myth-studies began with the Greeks in the fifth century B.C. and moved on to the Middle Ages where myths were treated as allegories. Later, during the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, with the advent of Romanticism, myths were considered truths and poetic allusions to myths were in vogue. Nature mythologists treated myths as pictures of nature. The ritual theory was probably the most predominant of all the theories because of the influence of the Scottish anthropologist James Frazer (1854-1941) and his monumental work *The Golden Bough* (1890), which can be called the storehouse of myths and rituals. The Social Force theory as expounded by Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) was the study of the function of the myth in a particular society. With the advent of psychoanalysis and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the meaning and study of myth took a completely different turn. Myths were interpreted in the form of symbols. And later, Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) dealt with them in the form of archetypes. The structuralist theory of Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009) emphasized the idea that myth transmits information through a structure. Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) found a pattern common to all the myths and called it the 'monomyth'. Besides these theories, a few theories like the Comparative theory and the Diffusion theory are also discussed in this chapter. The shift in focus is on to the relationship that myth shares with the other disciplines. Several artists, writers and technologists have been inspired by the classical myths for their vision and imagery with the advent of science, arts, music and literature. Thus, a special relationship is evident between myth and disciplines like history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, astronomy, astrology, biology, geology, music, fine arts, magic, and literature.
Also discussed in Chapter Two are the theory and practice of myth criticism, and the basic principles followed by the myth critics like Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), Francis Fergusson (1904-1986) who brought in the formalist approach to myth criticism, Carl Jung (1875-1961) and his psychological approach, Maud Bodkin (1875-1967) and her mimetic poetics, Leslie Fiedler (1917-2003) and his unique system of mythopoetics and concept of Signature, Philip Wheelwright (1901-1970) who differentiated what he called steno language from the discourse of myth and Northrop Frye (1912-1991) who redefined myth criticism by a pattern of five literary modes, myth, romance, high mimetic, low mimetic and irony. There is also a note on the early acceptance of myth criticism, the critiques of myth criticism and the relationship that myth criticism shares with the other schools of criticism.

Chapter Three discusses postcolonial criticism and its incorporation into myth criticism. Here, the meaning of the term postcolonial is first explored along with the concepts that go with it like otherness, orient, resistance, hybridity, ambivalence, nationhood, national allegory, cultural identity, and the theme of loss. The chapter also explains the major contributions of Edward Said (1935-2003), Homi Bhabha (1949-), Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), Gayatri C. Spivak (1942-), Ernest Renan (1823-1892), Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) and Fredric Jameson (1934-) to postcolonial theory. A note is also given on the several stages of development of postcolonial literatures, the analytical strategies adopted by the postcolonial critics and the indebtedness to other theories like marxism, post-modernism, post-structuralism, feminism and myth criticism. The idea that postcolonialism and myth criticism complement each other is explained here by taking a
few examples like the Tamil play *Pani-t-Thee* ("Frozen Fire") by Mangai, Tennyson’s poem ‘Ulysses’, Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* and Avadesh Kumar Singh’s criticism of Kalidasa’s *Abhigyanshakuntalam*.

The next two chapters, Chapters Four and Five, are analysis chapters that carefully analyze the selected Indian novels. The novels taken for study are in the chronological order of their publication. They are Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938), Krithika’s *Vasaveswaram* (1966), Sunil Gangopadhyay’s *Arjun* (1971), M.T. Vasudevan Nair’s *Randamoozham* (1977), Sethu’s *Pandavapuram* (1979), Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) and Kiran Nagarkar’s *Cuckold* (1997). The treatment of myth is carefully explored in all these novels in terms of their allusions, imagery and symbols from a myth-related perspective as well as their postcolonial stance. It may be felt that the analysis of some novels from an equal standpoint of both myth and the postcolonial may not be quite convincing, however, the re-interpretation of the myths in all the novels has helped in identifying the colonizer-colonized relationship in the novels. More importantly, I must add that the term ‘colonization’ is not always used here in the sense of political colonization, but in terms of a particular individual or a group exercising their authority over the others. Thus, Bhima in M.T. Vasudevan Nair’s *Randamoozham* and Maharaj Kumar in Kiran Nagarkar’s *Cuckold* are marginalized characters seeking to come out of their predicament by means of the voice attributed to them by their respective novelists. In fact, some of the novels discussed do have a feminist and subaltern angle strengthening the purpose of myth criticism. This is discerned in the marginalized female characters like Devi in Sethu’s *Pandavapuram* and
Devi and Sita in Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The logic behind the selection of the novels is that these novels neatly fit into the three forms of the myth matrix, which are explained in the comparative study of the novels discussed at the end of the second analysis chapter. One can also discern the different shades of character that Draupadi or Arjuna play in the different novels, or how the attitude of reverence moves into the realm of interrogation or revaluation in the context of historical necessity and societal issues.

Finally, Chapter Six, the conclusion, tries to identify the areas of similarity in both the mythical and postcolonial situation as presented in the novels. For this purpose, it was found useful to place the novels discussed in the previous chapters alongside non-fictional prose treatments of the issues arising out of mythological episodes and characters. Here, a sketch of Irawati Karve’s *Yuganta* (1969) is given wherein she delves deep into the psyche of several characters of the two great Indian epics and gives them a voice; their problems, which have not been addressed in the epics, have been considered in the book. A more recent book in this regard is Gurcharan Das’ *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* (2009). The book is a surprising account of how Indian mythology can find a parallel even in the field of business. The concept of *dharma* has been examined very carefully; how the *Mahabharata* is very elusive about it. How it teaches *dharma* or the righteousness to the world through *adharma* is the highlight of Das’ book. Chapter Six also takes in brief studies of short fiction narratives such as Mahasweta Devi’s “Draupadi”, and dramatic works such as Bhisham Sahni’s *Madhavi* and Mangai’s *Pani-t-Thee*, which adapt or re-evaluate episodes from the *Mahabharata* in a modernist context.
The main contention of my thesis is that myths are reborn in ingenious ways as writers from time to time try to fit them in a contemporary situation. Such myths may not be the exact clones of their mythical ancestors and they may not be endowed with the sanctity with which they were known in the past. The process of demythologization is an indispensable tool in the hands of authors who are trying to fit the age-old myths in a new situation. It takes place by de-contextualizing the classical myths and re-contextualizing them in the new context of the here and now. This leads to a wide horizon of the study of myths; the myths are never forgotten, besides, they acquire new forms and shapes and are made relevant to the contemporary context. This thesis has studied myths from various standpoints, more specifically in relation to the postcolonial theory. The individual novels taken for study are critically analyzed in terms of their relation to the past as well as their contemporary framework. A new identity is given to the myths according to the way in which they are understood by the particular generation and how they are interpreted to suit its needs.