CHAPTER I

MYTH AND LITERATURE

"... myth is so encyclopaedic a term that it means everything or nothing. We can find in it whatever we want to say is essential about the way humans try to interpret their place on earth. Myth is a synthesizer of values which uniquely manages to mean most things to most men. It is allegory and tautology, reason and unreason, logic and fantasy, waking thought and dream, atavism and the perennial, archetype and metaphor, origin and end. What a burden myth has to carry as a portmanteau term.”
(Gould 1981:5)

Myth is one word in the English language whose meaning comes full circle. It means truth and revelation and it also means false belief, and the word includes the whole range of meaning between. While one can wholeheartedly agree with Gould that myth is everything or nothing we soon realize that in trying to define myth Gould merely lists the various things it can be or contain and does not capture its essence. All attempts to define myth either focus on theme or form, structure or content, function or meaning. It becomes
illness—all come into place through individual myths and systems of myth. And in modern societies, too, the patterns derived from myths may be found to underlie our deepest personal histories and motivations, 'the unconscious'. Myths stubbornly pervade the way we treat one another and organize the space around us, they charge our works of art with urgent meaning" (Cook 1980:1).

If myth is the interaction of man's psyche with the unknown, this must necessarily be formulated in language and we are face to face with the paradoxical situation that language must now express the inexpressible, that which is beyond the reach of language. "There can be no myth without an ontological gap between event and meaning. A myth intends to be an adequate symbolic representation by closing that gap, by aiming to be a tautology . . . myth is both hypothesis and compromise. Its meaning is perpetually open and universal only because once the absence of final meaning is recognized, the gap itself demands interpretation, which in turn must go on and on, for language is nothing if it is not a system of open meaning" (Gould 1981:6).

This leads us naturally to admit that myth itself is an interpretative process and since it is encoded in language which is an open-ended system, further interpretation results. There is the inevitable overlap of the functions of the literary critic, mythologist, linguist, sociologist and anthropologist and so on. Once myth becomes encoded in language, it takes on the qualities of a literary text and gains an autonomous status. Instead of the original interaction between the psyche and the unknown we have the second level of
interaction between the myth-text and the individual, the listener or reader. A further stage in the interpretative process is then at work resulting in its transmutation. It is no longer an original insight but an instrument or tool available to the mind for various purposes. What can now be distinguished are the myth creators and the myth users, the former being anonymous in primitive times. Myth, therefore, becomes a system of structures and linguistic and semiotic theories can be applied to it. Since it manifests itself as literature, theories of form and genre can be applied to it. The earliest form was that of poetry and epic both in the oral and written tradition and as it passed from generation to generation it constituted the racial memory and permeated the unconscious.

When we have myth users distributed over long spans of time or myth users who get gradually dispersed in geographic terms, what results is the enlargement of the mythical system by the addition of variants that emerge out of this process. So we have myth clusters. Other processes are also at work like selection, simplification, modification, distortion, amplification and so on. The modern novelist as myth user has the whole repertoire of myth at his disposal. He can give a new perspective on old myths, or point to a continuing relevance or even resort to negation and demythification. He can use myth for the purpose of allusion, allegory, parody, satire and create several levels of meaning simultaneously.

The timeless concerns of literature like the meaning of life and death, the origins of life and cosmic significance, the conduct of life and interpersonal relationships are also the timeless concerns of myth. The
content of myth can be disguised in secular terms or it can be used for the purpose of allusion and allegory. By the obvious use of mythological themes the novelist seeks to redefine the myth, the past as well as the present and its ideologies. It can result in a refining process or a conceptualizing process. What ultimately emerges is a metalanguage and the final product is metafiction. As Barthes says, nothing can really escape myth and one might add nothing escapes literature. Both myth and literature strive toward a truth that is not merely fact. The unique position of the literary artist is that he can be both a myth user and myth creator simultaneously. This is amply demonstrated in the work of Ngugi and Rushdie discussed in the later chapters.

The close kinship between myth and literature would consequently show similarities in form, theme and technique. Literature makes use of the genre and form originally used for many myths—poetry and epic. It can also be a simple prose narrative. It may be equally right to say that myths have come down to us in the form that literature gave them. The origin of drama in ritual, myth and religious practices is well known. There was a gradual desacralization process in all the forms. There has been a revival of interest in certain mythological themes in the Western tradition like Oedipus, Antigone, Faust and so on. African writers draw on their mythology to instill a pride in their own identity, so badly damaged by colonialism and this serves the purpose of decolonization.

Besides form, what the literary artist uses to advantage are the techniques of narration and organization used in mythological stories. In
India, a dramatist like Girish Karnad uses a mythological frame work for his theme, and makes use of the *harikatha* and *bhagavatha* narrative technique. This is found in his play *Hayavadana*. By imposing a mythological framework on a contemporary situation in *Yayati* and *Nagamandala* he is able to see a continuing relevance in the old myths. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is organized in eighteen books like the epic *Mahabharata*. Narrative devices like story within a story, metaphor, symbol and allegory are exploited. The virtuosity with which the literary artist blends characteristics of different forms and genres leaves the critic absolutely helpless when faced with the inevitable task of labeling and categorizing.

Northrop Frye analyses the relationship between myth and realism. In myth metaphoric and symbolic structures are obvious. In realism, these elements must be fitted into the context of plausibility. To achieve this the writer resorts to a technique that Frye calls "displacement". In myth we can have gods or sacred entities, a sun god or a tree god for instance. In romance, we can only have a character who is like a sun god and can be associated with him through significant imagery. "The central principle of displacement is that what can be metaphorically identified in a myth can only be linked in romance by some kind of simile: analogy, significant association, incidental accompanying imagery and the like" (Frye 1973:137).

At times the fiction writer may not obviously refer to any myth through theme or character but make particular use of the patterns found in mythological stories. Seeing life as a journey or quest is a method by which
modern man's quest is linked to all the quest stories of the past, not by direct reference but by suggestion. The novelist is making use of the readers' store of knowledge to create the necessary parallels or distortions as the case may be. The personal quest of Milkman Dead in the *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison is one such example. The quest can be for one's mythological roots, an adventure into the history and myths of the race as in Witi Ihimaera's *The Matriarch*. Dislocations in time and space is a technique used by Alice Walker in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Ngugi's *Matigari* makes use of the quest pattern and the messiah-like hero together with many elements from Christian myth. The creation of characters who are akin to or obviously antithetical to the mythological hero is another technique of introducing the mythical aspect into fiction. Joyce's Bloom is the most outstanding example of this.

The timeless battle between good and evil and all the accompanying opposing forces, contradictions and conflicts are perennial themes in myth and literature. It is interesting to note this aspect even in modern comics like *Superman*. Such binary oppositions as Levi-Strauss calls them are at the heart of literature. Betrayal, punishment and exile, discovery or recognition, test-challenge, both physical and moral are mythical patterns identified by Joseph Campbell. These patterns are conspicuous in the Indian epic *Mahabharata* and Tharoor makes clever use of them in conjunction with contemporary Indian history. Another Indian writer who draws from the *Mahabharata* and makes use of the exile of the Pandavas, to parallel the exile and dispossession suffered by the Hindus from Bangladesh is Sunil Gangopadyay in his novel *Arjun*. In quite a different mode we have the
animal fable fantasy by Richard Adams titled *Watershipdown*. The sense of exile and impending doom is coupled with the Christian motif of the journey to the promised land. Matagari too, in Ngugi's novel, experiences exile and return. While in myths the heroes are assisted or obstructed by gods or supernatural agencies, in the modern novel, the use of coincidence achieves a similar effect.

In real life too, the forces of myth are ever at work. The myth making process can happen at many levels. An individual may initiate the process, and it may take hold in the community, or nation, or race. The history and politics of the Middle-East is shaped by one powerful motif, the journey of the Israelites to the promised land. Hitler cast himself in the mould of the leader of the greatest of human races for whom he would create the promised land. The numerous cult figures who have emerged, both religious and political, in almost every country bear evidence of the working of what can be called the mythical unconscious. The "heroization" and deification of political leaders is a most common phenomenon and this is perceptively depicted by Gabriel García Marquez in his *The Autumn of the Patriarch*. A more humorous treatment of the same theme is found in Alan Sealey's novel, *The Hero*. These writers show how a leader is raised to the level of the mythical hero in the imagination of the common people. It creates the interesting paradox of believing in something that is inherently self-created and which is untrue in reality. Leaders who know the importance of this assiduously sustain this public image. From this we can see that there is a curious relationship between myth, belief, hope and wish fulfillment. This is seen in the analysis of Ngugi's *Matigari* in Chapter II. The interplay between all these creates the
necessary tension that the novelist exploits and depicts. At one end of the spectrum, myth is the embodiment of wish fulfillment and at the other it is the highest truth or revelation.

Most myths are centred on a mythological figure or event -- Christ and his resurrection, the exodus and so on. These have been considered facts by orthodox religion and that religion supported a certain moral order. Now such facts are called into question and so is the moral order. A most piquant situation arises in the post-colonial countries where the religion (and myth) associated with imperialism, Christianity, is suddenly rejected in favour of native belief systems. Writers like Ngugi and Ihimeara attack the inherent double-speak of the colonial master.

Speaking in the context of comparative mythology, Joseph Campbell in his book *Myths to Live By* states:

“When these stories are interpreted, though, not as reports of historic fact, but as merely imagined episodes projected onto history, and when they are recognized then, as analogous to like projections produced elsewhere, in China, India and Yucatan, the import becomes obvious; namely, that although false and to be rejected as accounts of physical history, such universally cherished figures of the mythic imagination must represent facts of the mind . . .” (1973:10).

Another thematic pattern used by literature is separation, initiation and return. This may be used with no obvious mythical allusions or imagery as in *Huckleberry Finn* or combined with the quest theme as in *The Song of Solomon*. Within the typical framework of myth, a hero ventures forth from
the light of common day into a region of supernatural wonder where fabulous and fearsome forces are at play. These are to be encountered and a decisive victory won. After these test combats, the hero comes back to his people, endowed with a new power to lead his people to prosperity. “The usual pattern is, first, a break away or departure from the local social order and context; next a long, deep retreat inward and backward, as it were in time, and inward, deep into the psyche; a chaotic series of encounters there, darkly terrifying experiences, and presently, (if the victim is fortunate) encounters of a centering kind, fulfilling, harmonizing, giving new courage; and then finally, in such fortunate cases, a return journey of rebirth to life” (Campbell 1973:208-209).

In his discussions with Dr. Perry, a psychologist, Campbell discovered that the experiences of the schizophrenic corresponded closely with the descriptions of the quest journeys in mythology. Both now realized that the symbol coded messages of the mythological hero, the shaman and the mystic are addressed to the psyche. Such signals are called ‘affect images’ by Dr. Perry and any rationalization through the intellect will only destroy or distort the message. Its proper function seems to be “to carry the energies of an archetypal instinct system into fruitful play in a contemporary space-time daylight situation” (Campbell 1973:237). An interesting example from literature is Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. The hero Milkman Dead is engaged in a personal quest and it is not just a split in his character that we see but a reflection of the schizophrenic situation in the society itself, a wound in the Afro-American psyche caused by the racial problem. This is depicted not only in the differing attitudes of the Black and White races, but
in the difference between Milkman Dead and his friend Gringo. One dives into the past to seek and to reconstitute a lost mythology which will bestow a new group and individual identity while the other reacts with the daylight world with the violence that comes out of hate and frustration. In the case of Huckleberry Finn, however, the movement in time is linear and forward. But he too has a death experience or enacts one, breaks away from society, experiences loneliness and terror and crime during his journey down the river (initiation), and experiences a sense of detachment as he either enacts roles or watches others enact roles. Twain does not make him emerge as the ‘twice-born’ hero but he is nevertheless a different and wiser adolescent at the end, with insights that make him different.

While Campbell uses the expression ‘the energies of the archetypal instinct’ we find that the notion of the archetype is used by Northrop Frye as an analytical tool in literature. *The Anatomy of Criticism* is a case for the archetypal approach to literary criticism. The study of conventions in literature leads to the study of genres. Any poem may be examined not only as an imitation of nature but also as an imitation of other poems. The ‘shaping spirit of a poem is the form itself’. “Literature shapes itself, and is not shaped externally: the forms of literature can no more exist outside literature than the forms of sonata and fugue and rondo can exist outside music” (Frye 1973:97). This is not unlike T.S Eliot’s view of tradition. Besides form, a poem is connected to other poems by its use of symbols and images. This helps to unify and integrate our literary experience. By saying this, Frye is admitting that meaning goes beyond the text and lies in the associative powers of the reader’s mind. This happens inevitably when an author uses
either the mythical technique or the allusive technique. “Archetypes are associative clusters and differ from signs in being complex variables. Within the complex is often a large number of learned associations which are communicable because a large number of people in a given culture happen to be familiar with them” (1973:102). The participation of the reader is necessary to create the complete text. Reading becomes a creative activity and is not just a passive listening to the author’s voice. The roots of the reader response theories lie in such ideas of the unity of literature and the working of the archetypal symbols.

Frye distinguishes four phases in the development of literature while discussing his theory of symbols. The first is the Literal and Descriptive Phase where the symbol functions as a motif and as a sign. Literature tends to be realistic and descriptive. The second is the Formal Phase where the symbol functions as image. The third is the Mythical Phase and here the symbol functions as archetype. The Anagogic Phase is the fourth and final phase where the symbol functions as Monad. Universal archetypal symbols like the city, the garden, the quest, and marriage are no longer forms that man constructs within nature but are themselves nature. “Anagogically, then, poetry unites total ritual, or unlimited social action, with total dream, or unlimited individual thought. Its universe is infinite and boundless hypothesis”(1973:120). Frye seems to be thinking of the apocalyptic text or the genre of the fantasy novel and the works of Ben Okri and Salman Rushdie come to mind. Literature seems to start with myth and then develops the tragic and comic modes, moving into the secular and ironic and finally approaches the mythological again.
The archetypal approach or perspective according to Frye, is the process of making human form out of nature, and its changing forms reveal the progress and development of civilization itself. "An archetypal symbol is usually a natural object with a human meaning, and it forms part of the critical view of art as a civilized product, a vision of the goals of human work" (Frye 1973:112).

According to Freud, myths are of the psychological order of dreams. In other words myths are public dreams and dreams are private myths. Both are the outcome of childhood repressions and disappointments. Jung, however, has a more positive view. All our energies are directed outward during the course of the days work and we gradually lose touch with inward forces. Myths according to Jung, when correctly understood bring us back to those inner subconscious forces. They tell us in symbols and picture language of the powers of the psyche, those powers that have helped man to transcend the ordinary, to harmonize the inner and the outer worlds. Myths represent the wisdom of the races. This view takes Frye's argument a step further and is echoed by Joseph Campbell when he says that "the society that cherishes and keeps its myths alive will be nourished from the soundest, richest strata of the human spirit" (Campbell 1973:13).

In the anagogic phase literature exists in its own universe, no longer a commentary on life and reality, but containing life and reality in a system of verbal relationships (Frye 1973:122). In saying this Frye is both right and wrong -- right when he says that literature becomes a self-sustaining system and wrong when he says that it is no longer a commentary on life and reality.
The characteristic feature of literature and of myth is that it is rooted in life, while its branches may extend in different directions for different purposes. Frye's view is significant because he takes up the idea that literature is a system in its own right. It is like myth, a gigantic set with many subsets. The ambivalence lies in that myth can be seen as a subset of literature and literature in its turn can be viewed as a subset of myth. They are interacting as well as interdependent systems, each drawing sustenance from the other. This makes both of them metalanguage systems.

This fits in with Roland Barthes's view of myth and language. To begin with, Barthes says, "Myth is a type of speech." Myth is not a concept, idea or object but a "mode of signification, a form." It is a type of discourse that works as a semiological system (Sontag 1993:93). Anything can be appropriated for the use of myth for some time and then it can fall into disuse and lose its mythical status, and later be recovered again. So, one can have ancient myths but not eternal ones. Myth makes use of material already worked upon by language and uses it to create a second order of meaning which becomes generally accepted by social convention. Therefore the postulates of semiology can be applied to the study of myth. Thus, according to Barthes, myth cannot be defined by the object of its message, nor can it be defined by the materials it uses, for any material can be arbitrarily endowed with meaning by social usage. The 'semiological schema' that Barthes draws up is as follows:
Barthes gives us a tri-dimensional pattern where the meaning slides back and forth in order to produce the final signification. What is peculiar to myth is that it is a second order semiological system. What is the sum of signs or the final term of the first semiological chain (3. Sign), i.e. the associative total of a concept and an image, becomes a mere signifier for the second. Hence myth becomes a metalanguage, a second language, in which one speaks about the first. To avoid confusion that would arise if the same terms--sign, signifier, signified--are used, Barthes uses the terms form, concept and signification, indicated in brackets in the above diagram. This scheme of analysis will be applied to some extracts from Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel*, in Chapter IV.

Albert Cook examines the relationship between myth and language. If we consider myth as an attempt to encode the abstract in language, it becomes primarily a linguistic act. It becomes apparent then, that the two systems can coalesce and yet be distinct. The telling of a myth becomes a “technique for handling the unknown.” Essentially, it is a naming process that cannot be done with signifiers alone, for what is being attempted is the
translation of an intuitive-emotional-ideational complex into language. It must necessarily reveal itself as a tale or narrative. So it uses a language system to emerge as a literature system and transcends both, for myth is a reaching out to the Unknown. The difference between Barthes' approach and that of Cook is that the former considers myth to be content-free whereas Cook looks on it as a linguistic process that translates a content. Cook points to a paradox inherent in myth when he says that myth is 'continuous with language' because comments about it are made in language and yet it is discontinuous with language as it deals with the unknown. It thus resists formulation and definition. Gould also says, "literature and myth must exist in a continuum, by virtue of their function as language: myth tends to a literary sense of narrative form and fictions aspire to the status of myth" (1981:11).

Cassirer bases the same idea on the emotive response of man. All around him man sees things that evoke an emotion. Things seen and unseen may be benignant or malignant, friendly or dreadful, familiar or uncanny; they inspire confidence or awe or terror and "mythical thought expands the experience over the whole universe." This is why transformations and transfigurations figure frequently in myth. "In myth man objectifies his own deepest emotions; he looks at them as if they had an outward existence"(1979:173). Cassirer terms this physiognomical interpretation.

This objectification or symbolization is a technique common to myth, language and literature. Psychologists may call it projection in some cases. Cassirer makes distinctions. While myth is imaginative objectification, art is
a process of intuitive or contemplative objectification and language and science are conceptual objectification (1979:187). While saying that myth is imaginative objectification Cassirer is careful to point out that it is not simply fanciful thinking, for myth reaches back to the origin of things and wishes to know why they are.

Images, archetypes and symbols are not mere decorative or literary devices. They are the special indicators of a culture as they are lived values. When they are not, the value of the symbol also declines and may even die out for a period until it is rediscovered and relived by a new generation or group. Mircea Eliade says that a symbol is an instrument of knowledge. It has a cognitive value. The symbol, the myth and the image are the very substance of spiritual life. They may become disguised, mutilated or degraded but are never extirpated (Eliade 1969:11).

"Any linguistic act is at once individual and social, an act of parole that uses the langue" (Cook 1980:268). The action of myth on the individual and society is similar. Like language itself, the study of myth can be both synchronic and diachronic. In talking about such relationships between myth, language and literature, we are really talking about interpretation, which is a "network of possibilities" as Gould puts it (1981:35). It becomes a question of perception and the origin of consciousness which is really the area of phenomenology. We seem to be in the middle ground between linguistics, anthropology, psychology and religion. Jaques Derrida, in his essay titled 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' says, "There is no unity or absolute source of myth. The focus or
the source of myth are always shadows and virtualities which are elusive, unactualizable, and nonexistent in the first place. Everything begins with structure, configuration, or relationship" (Seturaman ed. 1989:305).

Does myth create or appropriate the linguistic processes like metaphor, metonomy, and symbolism? Does the literary artist learn the narrative techniques from mythical narratives? The earliest narrative is the myth and the earliest literary activity was the retelling of these myths. Classical drama and epic poetry have their roots in ritual enactment and mythological tales. They form the foundation of all literature from which forms, genres and themes have evolved in complex ways. There is the mythical vision and the mythical technique.

There are strategies for getting from myth to language and from language to myth. Every mythology is a repository of concepts and techniques. Literature draws from it and by making use of mythical material gives it a new life and wider currency. The shifts are dramatic when myths pass from the oral mode to the written mode. The extreme adaptability, flexibility and scope for interpolations that is available in the oral mode is lost to some extent in the written mode. Besides this, the written mode is more self-conscious and assumes a reader will appropriate the text at some later time whereas the oral mode is always addressed to a group audience. All this affects the relationship between myth and language.

Once literature appropriates myth, it becomes the subject of literary criticism. There is the gradual and inevitable desacralization of myth. The process of myth formation itself is examined and imitated for secular and
unfamiliar with Hindu or Tibetan mythology, describe beings that closely resemble the deities of those cultures.

There seems to be some "internal logic of symbols" as Eliade puts it, and somehow reminds one of the internal programme that migratory birds follow. "To grasp the authentic structures and functions of symbols, one must turn to the inexhaustible indices of the history of religions" (Eliade 1969:37). This sense of the sacred and timeless is evoked by these symbols creating a kind of demarcation between the sacred and the profane. The symbols common to many cultures and mythologies and their capacity for survival through the ages, through dramatic and often violent cultural and religious change is highlighted by Eliade. In most archaic societies, the known world is the microcosm, The Centre, inhabited and organized space. Beyond is the fathomless unknown--chaos, death and night, the region of the benefic and malefic forces, gods, angels, demons, ghosts, spirits of the ancestors. This structure of thinking leads to the conception of the enemy as a demonic being or the personification of evil. In modern literature an example of this kind of organization is found in Melville's *Moby Dick*. It is soon apparent that the polarity between good and evil exists not only in the external world but in the inner world of Ahab, as a psychological obsession or an unreasonable passion. Some of the mythical symbols and its variants used in literature are the Cosmic Tree, the tree as cross and Christ himself, the symbolism of fire and water, for the purpose of purification, initiation and baptism, sacred spaces and rivers and so on.
To understand the sacramental value of symbols, one has to live them. The best way to perpetrate them is to enact them. This becomes a ritual which can be seen as a symbolic speech act that helps to keep the emotive aspect of the symbol alive. Nevertheless, like all symbols and metaphors the significance of the ritual can become obfuscated or even die out.

The structuralist approach to the understanding of myth put forward by Levi-Strauss, has contributed in a large measure to literary criticism. His work shows the inter-connectedness between anthropology, psychology, linguistics, literary criticism and other social sciences. At first interested in geology, his mind studied the oppositions in the landscape -- hills and plains, cliffs and valleys, rivers and deserts. His mind made similar connections between linguistics and society. He saw society as an aggregate of signs, a structure. All elements in a language acquire meaning only when they are considered in relationship with one another. Similarly, society is structured on various relationship codes and taboos. The taboo is not purely negative; it does not tend to suppress union but rather to differentiate them: this union is permissible and that one is not. "The rule is made up of a yes and a no, a binary opposition similar to that of elementary linguistic structures. It is a model which directs and distributes the flow of generations. It fulfills a distinguishing mediating function . . ." (Paz 1970:17). The originality of Levi-Strauss lies in that he shows how to use the structural rules/patterns of one system in deciphering another system. The language of one system can be translated into another system. So Levi-Strauss sees kinship terms as
elements of meaning and like the units of language, they acquire that
meaning only in relation to other units in the system.

This structural approach is applied to the study of myths by Levi-
Strauss. However, myth is "both the same thing as language and also
something different from it." Taking up Saussure's distinction between
langue and parole, Levi-Strauss says that one is the structural aspect and
the other the statistical aspect; langue belongs to reversible time and parole
non-reversible. Levi-Strauss draws a parallel from French history. A
historian, referring to the French Revolution, sees it as a non-reversible
sequence of events in the past. A French politician however, sees it not as a
past event but a timeless pattern which can be detected in contemporary
French society and which may provide a clue to interpret the present and
infer a course for the future as well. "It is that double structure, altogether
historical and ahistorical, which explains how myth while pertaining to the
realm of parole and calling for an explanation as such, as well as to that of
langue in which it is expressed, can also be an absolute entity on a third
level, which though it remains linguistic by nature, is nevertheless distinct
from the other two" (Levi-Strauss 1976:210). This position is comparable to
that of Barthes. The third level for Levi-Strauss is composed of 'bundles of
relations' of the constituent units which he calls mythemes. A mytheme
always has a certain function related to a subject and isolating them can
reveal an underlying pattern or structure. Levi-Strauss draws up a table of
such mythemes for the Oedipus myth. The horizontal reading gives a
sequential meaning whereas the vertical grouping will give the bundle of
relations.
The above approach helps Levi-Strauss to be inclusive. No variants of a particular myth can be discarded, but together they form an aggregate that can show the way in which cultural re-interpretation has proceeded. The literary critic is well aware of the importance of this when he has to reckon with the many attempts to restate, not merely retell myths like the story of Prometheus, Antigone or Faust. In India this is well recognized and respected for there are many versions of the sacred epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

What Levi-Strauss has done for literary criticism is that he has provided a useful tool for analysis, for binary oppositions are an inevitable part of life and attempts to mediate between them will always be a part of literature. In the section called 'Structuralism and Literary Criticism' in Structural Anthropology II Levi-Strauss says:

“Both in linguistics and anthropology, the structural method consists in perceiving invariant forms within different contents. But structural analysis that certain critics and historians of literature unduly claim to apply consists, on the contrary, in seeking recurring contents under variable forms. Thus we already see evidence of a double misunderstanding regarding content and form, and regarding the relation between notions as distinct as recurrence and invariance (the former still open to contingency, the latter appealing to necessity)” (1978:274).

Levi-Strauss’s approach to myth, though anthropological, can be seen as a study of the relationship between the unconscious and mythic
thought. It is seen as a dialectic between the abstract and the concrete and the history of myth becomes the history of man's developing consciousness. Yet what Levi-Strauss seeks is a pattern of structural laws that is operationally constant. The pre-conscious, he says, is "a reservoir of recollection and images amassed in the course of a lifetime." This is an aspect of memory. The unconscious imposes structural laws on the mental images resulting from experience, and transforms it into language. "We might say therefore, that the pre-conscious is the individual lexicon where each of us accumulates a vocabulary of his personal history, but this vocabulary becomes significant, for us and for others, only to the extent that the unconscious structures it according to its laws and thus transforms it into language..." (Qtd. by Gould:100-101)

Though Levi-Strauss projects an anti-functionalist stand on myth, it is clear that he is talking about the symbolic function. His attempt to isolate constants and variables is similar to the work of Vladimir Propp (Morphology of the Folktale) where he sees characters in terms of functions and actions in terms of relations. If there are sections of the narrative that do not fit into these categories, Propp says that they can be either 'connectives' or 'motivations', a narrative unit that links up everything together. Levi-Strauss devotes a whole chapter to a discussion of Propp's method.

The insights of Levi-Strauss, Propp and Barthes can be used in the analysis of narratives that have a significant combination of myth and fiction. We can take for example, The Great Indian Novel by Tharoor. Here we have a whole set of mythemes from the Indian epic Mahabharata and
they are linked to Indian history. The art of Tharoor lies in integrating the
two together. If we see these as two independent systems, then Tharoor
makes them coalesce at some points, interlace at others and develop micro-
sequences of their own at other points in the narrative. The structural
complexity of the novel becomes a source of multiple meanings and creates
multiple levels of reading. The pleasure lies in keeping up with the author as
he goes through these manoeuvres.

Since all the examples chosen for analysis combine myth, history and the
art of fiction, it is important to see the relationship between them. We have
already said that myth is a system of systems and hence it can absorb history
into its processes. Likewise history is also complex system that has
subsystems within it. All of them can be seen as coded sign-systems. Though
each one contributes to the other none of them is complete in itself. “What
makes history possible is that a sub-set of events is found, for a given period,
to have approximately the same significance for a contingent of individuals
who have not necessarily experienced events or may even consider them at
an interval of several centuries. History is therefore never history, but
history for . . .” (italics mine) (Gould 1981:105). If history is a code it needs
interpretation. Every generation feels the need to re-interpret history for
itself and this need is more acutely felt in times of crisis, alienation or simply
existential anxiety. These are the points in life where man needs to know, to
understand both himself and life and the world around him. Fiction writers
give expression to this need and try to explore the possible answers. This
process is evident in the novels of Ihimaera and Ngugi chosen for study here.

Like myth, history is both synchronic and diachronic. "The history of myth is homologous to the myth of history." To speak of history in the twentieth century is to speak of political ideologies and the conflicts they produced. The one who is able to see in this the time-tested patterns of mythology is Cassirer. The study of the growth of civilization and culture would show that myth is a fundamental shaping influence. With the rise of rationalism and the scientific temper it was believed that myth belonged to a phase of development that had long since passed. What Cassirer helps us see is that myth wears a new garb and emerges as a potent force in the conflicts of modern political systems. The difference between the past and the forces of the twentieth century is that what was an unconscious process has now become consciously regulated and organized for concrete political ends. "Our modern political myths are by no means the outgrowth of a dark or mythic power . . . They were made deliberately and destined for special purposes. They were brought into being by the word of command of the political leaders" (Cassirer 1979:235-236). Cassirer bases his theory on the French scholar Edoutte's view that the demonic or divine powers we meet in primitive mythologies are not so much the personification of natural forces as personification of social forces. The one who gives expression to the collective desires becomes the leader who begins to symbolize all the hopes, desires and fears of the people. As social forces gather momentum, the process of deification and 'devilization' begin, a process so common in India. The polarization between the negative and positive is typical of mythical thought
and imagination. "It conceives the world as a great drama -- as a struggle between the divine and demonic forces, between light and darkness, between good and evil"(1979:238). The evil is identified as a group of people (the Jews in Germany) or a class or race or those adhering to an opposed ideology. To deny or doubt this ideology would be a 'mortal sin', a crime of high treason against the leader or political party. A system of taboos is soon established.

The above polarization is seen as the centre of the conflict in Ihimaera's novel *The Matriarch* where the pakeha is seen as the demon to be countered. It is not just the race but its perspective of history. The most vivid fictionalization of this theory would be Ngugi's *Matigari* where the two opposing political forces are either deified or demonized, depending on whose side the reader takes. These myth systems are deliberately created in the struggle for power and control.

Another significant aspect of mythology as well as the philosophy of history is the idea of the millennium. Cassirer points out that all political ideologies promise the millennium when all desires will be fulfilled and all evil banished. Such a millennium was promised by Hitler to the German race. In *The Matriarch* Te Kooti also promises such a millennium and it becomes the foundation of the Ringatu religion. Matigari seeks this promised land and challenges the established government as it has not realized this cherished dream of the people to establish a land of justice and plenty.

*In the mythical pandemonium we always find maleficient spirits that are opposed to the beneficent spirits. There is always a secret or open revolt of Satan against God. In the German pandemonium this role was assigned to*
the Jew" (Cassirer 1979:238). In the cold war era the West assigned this role to the communists. In Ngugi's novel, this role is assigned to Settler Williams and John Boy, who are in turn symbols. On the other hand, the Ministry of Truth and Justice, has its own myth to project and considers Matigari as the enemy/demon. The Maori situation in Ihimaera's novel lends itself to a similar analysis. What modern political ideology has done is to harness and give direction to this mythical thought.

Cassirer points out that the politician who wants to ensure a following creates new 'magic' words that work like the magic chants of primitive society. New rites and rituals are also created. Once again Cassirer illustrates with the German example. Several new coinages were made during the Nazi regime and it can be clearly seen that the balance between the objective/descriptive and the subjective/emotive aspects of the language is upset. The creation of new political rituals goes hand in hand with this. German social life was radically changed. Russia underwent a similar change under communism. The imperialist regimes understood this very well and one of the ways by which they sought to cancel out the native identity was to change place names and through religion/baptism, change the names of individuals in the subject race—Aotearoa becomes New Zealand, a Ngugi becomes James and so on. Creation of new institutions and obliteration of native culture follow in stages. This is the 'epistemic violence' that Gayatri Spivac speaks of and this is what Ihimaera and Ngugi fight through their fiction.
"What we find here is the blending together and even the fusion of two contradictory and incompatible elements: The elements of magical and technical thought."(Cassirer 1979:253). It feeds on opposing emotions -- a combination of despair and overconfidence. That is, despair in the face of what seems an insoluble problem and a new-found confidence in the capacity of the hero-leader with his new ideology to solve it. The political myths are just as much an outcome of conflicting tendencies as primitive myths. Since all rational means did not solve the problem, the collective desire now focuses on the Leader in the same manner in which the tribe focused on the sorcerer or shaman. The Leader emerges in such a crisis when the collective desire has gathered enough momentum and strength to make the Leader the personification of hope or change or solution. The mythical process then takes over.

Cassirer says that the political myths are artificially and deliberately crafted by very skillful and cunning artisans. "Myths were invented and manufactured in the same sense and according to the same methods as machine guns or aeroplanes. And they were used for the same purpose, for internal and external warfare"(253). The propaganda efforts by the Ministry of Truth and Justice in Matigari and Te Kooti's new religion in The Matriarch demonstrate the truth of Cassirer's analysis.

The question of whether the politician believes in his new ideology or whether he created it for the purpose of obtaining power is irrelevant here. It is just as difficult to say whether the primitive myth is an expression of truth or a mere symbolical representation. What is important is that the mythical
1789 tried to eliminate the bourgeoisie culture, it has only reappeared in a new form that pretended that it is not bourgeoisie. A certain structure of ownership and order and ideology remain. The old order now presents itself as nationalism or the idea of the French nation. The bourgeoisie ideology is now the ideology of the political parties. Art presents itself as avant-garde and its tastes are normal and universal. This process Barthes calls 'the ex-nominating function' for myth naturalizes everything. The bourgeoisie never calls itself by that name, but uses other names for itself, holds up various images and people try to approximate themselves in their thought and behaviour to that norm. This is how, Barthes says, myths immobilize the world and prevent man from inventing himself. In other words, myth helps to perpetrate a stereotype and safeguard the archetype. Therefore myth on the right is rich, varied and powerful.

The only type of language that does not partake of myth is the language of the oppressed, the language of revolution. It remains political, it means what it says. It attempts to de-mythicize the bourgeoisie myth. When we apply this perspective to Matigari we find that both the government and the people are caught in opposing myth systems and only Matigari wants to speak the truth, plain and simple. "Where can I find truth and justice?" he asks again and again and the people do not understand and look for the mythical Matigari they themselves have created, whereas, the government refuses to acknowledge the question and paints Matigari a mad man. The language of revolution attempts to de-mythicize or, to use Robert Kroetsch's phrase, it is a process of 'unhiding the hidden.'
Barthes however acknowledges that the Left can also become a victim of its own myths. Once the revolution is called 'the left' it begins to wear a mask, to hide its name and the ex-nominating process begins. Barthes gives the example of the Stalin myth. The signifier is the real person Stalin. The signification becomes the sanctified Stalin, the genius who sublimated the qualities yearned for, the leader who was seen as the realizer of dreams.

One can debate the conclusions drawn by Barthes about the Myth of the Right and the Myth on the Left and perhaps succeed in controverting them completely especially after the break-up of the Soviet Union. What is relevant here is the mythical process identified by Barthes. We can see the ex-nominating process at work in Ngugi's Matigari and the hero himself resisting the process. Salman Rushdie uses the ex-nominating process as a narrative technique, for reality and myth are confounded one with the other at all times.

It is interesting to contrast Barthes's views on the Left with those of Mircea Eliade. In Myths, Dreams and Mysteries, Eliade has a chapter on the myths of the modern world where he says,

"...whatever we may think of the scientific claims of Marx it is clear that the author of the Communist Manifesto takes up and carries on one of the great eschatological myths of the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean world, namely: the redemptive part to be played by the Just (the 'elect', the 'anointed', the 'innocent', the 'missioners', in our own days by the proletariat), whose sufferings are invoked to change the ontological status of the world. In fact, Marx's classless society, and
the consequent disappearance of all historical tension, find their most exact precedent in the Myth of the Golden Age, which according to a number of traditions, lies at the beginning and end of History. Marx has enriched this venerable myth with a truly messianic Judaeo-Christian ideology; on the one hand by the prophetic and soteriological function he ascribes to the proletariat; and on the other, by the final struggle between Good and Evil, which may well be compared with the apocalyptic conflict between Christ and Anti-Christ, ending in the decisive victory of the former. It is indeed significant that Marx turns to his own account the Judaeo-Christian eschatological hope of an absolute goal of History..." (Eliade 1960:25-26).

The two groups of people who have overtly demonstrated the need for reinterpretation of history and myth through literature are the Afro-Americans and the feminists. The women of the world are envisaging a new identity and a new role for themselves. For this they need to rewrite history from the women's perspective. We have therefore a work like The Women's History of The World by Rosemary Miles and The Feminist Companion To Mythology edited by Carolyne Larrington.

The Afro-American experience demonstrates how the mythical imagination gives a people a heroic endurance in the face of dehumanizing experience and how it is a powerful agent of change. A survey of Afro-American fiction will show that the writers are constantly fictionalizing history and thereby reformulating it. Techniques like time-space displacement, telescoping and a throwback to the oral tradition are used. This
is the way of not only restructuring history but restructuring their self-image. The protagonists, both men and women, in these novels are working at the utmost reaches of human possibility and displaying a heroism that makes them legendary. They are constantly demonstrating the transformations that are possible with a change in perception. Two processes are at work. They mythicize history and at the same time seek their roots in an African mythology. The Afro-American writer, James Baldwin in a dialogue with Margaret Mead in A Rap on the Race says, “if history were the past, history wouldn’t matter. History is the present. You and I are history. We carry our history.... We act on it. And if one is going to change history -- we have to change ourselves.”

The movement is again twofold -- not only a delving into the past and looking into the future -- but twofold in another sense as well. It is a simultaneous de-mythicizing and re-mythicizing process. After the Emancipation Proclamation in America, both the Whites and the Blacks were forced to overturn their perception of themselves. The White writers had depicted what they liked to believe was true and this led to stereotyping that had little connection with reality. They portrayed types like the benevolent master, the comic darkies, the tainted mulattos, loyal mammies, the oversexed black woman -- all necessary for the exploitation by the whites. The black male was always seen as one who wanted to rape a white woman. All this needed the de-mythicizing power of fiction, which could present an alternate version of reality. This alternate version showed the dignity, heroism, the enormous endurance, the humanity and regenerative humour of the black people. The women--the grandmothers and mothers were the
keepers of black culture, the family makers with an innate dignity and strength. This tremendous change in their outlook and in the outlook of white people as well, needed the resources of the mythical imagination.

It is interesting to note that the Afro-American (and African) writers make use of Western myth, Christian myth, and African myth for their purpose. In her book *Black Mythic Fiction* Jane Campbell talks about W.E.B.Du Boi's novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* which uses a Marxist interpretation of the Jason myth to attack the exploitation of the plantation workers. W.M.Kelley creates a messiah-like character and gives him the ironic name of Tucker Caliban who leads his people in an exodus from a Southern state. He uses Christian mythical patterns and also sees the mythical possibilities in the literature tradition itself. Similar combinatorial strategies are used by Toni Morrison in the *Song of Solomon*. The protagonist, Milkman Dead, comes to understand what his grandfather meant when he said, "If you surrender to the air, you can ride it." Morrison wants to show the power that one can gain from a quest into one's personal history and racial history. The work of Ralph Elison, James Baldwin and Alex Haley are well known examples in the Afro-American tradition.

Fiction also explores the need for a personal myth in the modern world. Poets like Blake and Yeats have shown us how powerful it can be in their lives. Such personal myths have passed into the literary canon, and this makes them accessible to others. Yet they do not become culture myths though the personal myth can draw from culture myths. Anyone can have a personal myth and it depends on the faculty of symbolization. In psychology
it is called 'projection'. Stephenson Bond in his book *Living Myth* describes it thus: "Attributing power to a stone is a projection of course. The stone is just a rock. Projection, one of the most straightforward psychological concepts, is the basic confusion between object and subject, outer and inner. Something on the inside, a piece of myself, is perceived on the outside -- projected onto the object. The inanimate object is simply a mirror, reflecting an image of myself back to me" (1993:7). When this distinction between subject and object is dissolved, we have the participation mystique.

The example in modern fiction that comes to mind is Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*. She plays around with the codes of various systems--myth, religion, anthropology, psychology and literature--with the expertise of a juggler who keeps several balls in the air at a time. If Bakhtin uses the term 'heteroglossia' to refer to the stratification in the system of language, we can say that Alice Walker, Rushdie and others create 'textual heteroglossia'. Alice Walker combines tribal myth, biblical myth, uses space-time distortion, and blurs the border line between myth and fantasy.

The notions of dream, fantasy, magic and myth are closely linked. In literature the genre of fantasy makes use of mythical patterns to a large extent. Tolkien's method as well as his vision are essentially mythical in nature. The impact he has had, becoming a cult figure, is again like the working of myth. It is interesting to compare Gould's definition of myth given in the beginning of the chapter with E.F.Bleiler's statement about fantasy, in his introduction to *A Checklist of Modern Fantastic Literature*. "If anyone were to ask me what is meant by the form of fantasy, I fear that I would have
to admit my ignorance. A year or so ago, I would have had no difficulty in answering, but the compiling and reading involved in the preparation of the Checklist has forced me to realize that fantasy may be almost all things to all men.” After quoting Bleiler, Manlove gives his own definition of fantasy: “A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms” (1975:1). The works of Ben Okri and Salman Rushdie show how myth and fantasy can be so closely interlinked that quite often it becomes difficult to distinguish between them.

This takes us to the question of belief and the relationship between myth and religion, magic and the occult. There has been a great deal of transformation in the meaning of the word myth, and the peculiarity of the word is that most of the meanings are now current simultaneously. The word myth has been subjected to the conflicting claims of skepticism and belief. Myth can be considered to be a kind of primordial revelation, a story that imparts the sense of the sacred and the transcendent. It creates exemplary models and sets forth a sacred tradition that can organize and harmonize man with the cosmos, and man with man. Every religion has its storehouse of mythological stories which somehow nourish faith and give direction. The question of “truth” arises when such tales are evaluated in terms of factual or literal truth. They may then be dismissed as ‘false’ or reconciled with ‘truth’ when read as allegories or symbolical tales pointing to a transcendent truth. Colin Falck talks of a mythic mode of apprehension of reality. “The mythic mode of consciousness is a vision of reality, and therefore also of men’s place in reality, in which the perceived presence and activity of
certain gods, super-human creatures, or cosmic forces, is accepted by a community as an adequate and satisfying perception of all main events of the world as it is ordinarily experienced (Falck 1991:116).

The relative value of the words 'true', 'false', religion' is seen in Joseph Strelka's attempt at differentiation: "true myth is connected with genuine religion although it may be explained psychoanalytically... False myth, on the other hand, rests upon a total secularization of the mythical realm. In other words, true myth by its very nature transcends the logical sphere or the realm of outward manifestation, while false myth either reduces the infinite to the finite or applies the infinite qualities to the finite" (Strelka 1980:viii-ix). What Strelka forgets is that what is true religion for one group of people may be false religion for another. In fact, the rise of Christianity in the Western world put a stamp of falsehood on all other religions which were deemed pagan or blasphemous.

The meaning of the word 'myth' as false belief, illusion, invention or fiction is not new. Zenophanes (ca.565-470) criticized and rejected the mythology of Homer and Hesiod. Euhemerus who lived in the fourth century B.C. considered myth to be history in disguise. The gods were men and the passage of time and men's imagination had magnified and distorted their stories to make them appear divine. This system of interpretation came to be called 'euhemerism' and it had many adherents. Many schools of thought developed, the Pragmatic School, the Psychic School and the Stoics. The Pragmatists would see in the figure of Pallas Athena, a transfigured mortal queen; the second, the Psychic would explain her as 'understanding', and the
Stoic would consider her to represent the air between the moon and the earth (Spence rpt.1994:43).

What we have now is a history of mythology, a history of myth theory and criticism, a history of literature and a history of literary criticism. The whole range must now include the meaning of myth as a type of thought process, a type of speech, a structure of consciousness and so on. Perhaps, Barthes sums it up when he says, “Myth is a value, truth is no guarantee for it” (Sontag ed.1993:109). To add to this complexity, we now have literary artists who are well aware of these theories, utilizing them in their creative work. So the creative imagination, the critical imagination and the mythical imagination seem to be working together, and the academician must perforce theorize about it once again!

The literary artist now can appropriate myth for his own purposes-- to demythicize, distort, deconstruct, satirize, parody, educate or simply shock. He can create his own myths, which can correlate with the existing one or clash with it. “Myth serves us, not as a compendium of belief, and still less as a reservoir of history and convenient fiction, but rather as a modality wherein we consciously mediate between fiction and belief, between language and whatever it is that lies beneath and beyond language” (Cook 1980: 266).