CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
Myth : Its Meaning and Function

The term "myth" has been interpreted variously. For the Greeks, mythos meant "fable", "tale", "talk", "speech". In the Indian as well as the Western thought, the various forms of mythology, mythography and myth-making give credence to its encyclopaedic scope. Mythological thought is imbued with the rainbow colours of universal experiences of the infant stage of humanity, its intimations of immortality and happiness. Its relation has been with the universal mind (the Collective Unconscious), and not with the individual mind. As such, myths can be called the treasure of the experiences of mankind. A hub of the wheeled universe as myths are, man forges intimate relationship with gods, demons, animals, and nature. That is why mysteries, magic, miracles, chance and fate have become the salient features for conducting their lives. The characterization of gods, heroes, animals, birds, incidents and relationships is not easy due to the constant confrontation of opposites (binary oppositions) such as man/woman, life/death, curse/blessing, taboo/convention.
At one level, myth is a straightforward story, a narrative; at another level, it reflects the integrating values around which societies are organized. It codifies belief, safeguards morality, vouches for the efficacy of the ritual and provides social norms. It is a rationalization of man's activity in the past although the expression may take on non-rational forms. It remains socially important as long as it is a charter of belief, but becomes ineffective when seen as a myth. As a charter of belief, it serves to protect cultural continuity and provides, through its theme, a point of cultural equilibrium. That is why Bronislaw Malinowski avers:

Myth is a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.

Thus myth is an extremely cultural reality which can be approached and interpreted from various and complementary viewpoints. Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of the "beginnings". In other words, myths tell us how, through the deeds of supernatural beings, a reality has come into existence, be it the whole of reality, the cosmos, or only a fragment of reality - an island, a species of plant, an institution or a particular kind of human behaviour. It is always an account of "creation"; it relates how something was produced and fashioned forth. Since the actors in myths
are supernatural beings who are known primarily by what they did in the times of the "beginnings", myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness or the supernaturalness of their works. In short, myths describe the various and, sometimes, dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the supernatural) into the world. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really establishes the world and makes of supernatural beings that man himself is what he is today—mortal, sexed and cultural being. The myth is regarded as a sacred story and hence a "true history" because it always deals with realities. The cosmogonic myth is true because the existence of the world is there to prove it; the myth of the origin of death is equally true because man's mortality proves it. "Myths, whether Greek or American Indian", comments Richard Chase, "are survivals of those primitive ages when the mythmaking mind reigned supreme and that only long reconstructing primitive see psychology—which we see still at work in something like its pristine form among modern ravages—can we understand myth".3 In this context, it is worthwhile to know what M.H. Abrams has to say about myth. In his opinion:

One story in a mythology... a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, and to establish the rationale for social customs and observances and the sanctions for the rules by which men conduct their lives.4
In Abrams's definition of myth, three points are significant: first, the hereditary character of myth; second, the belief of the particular cultural group; and third, the importance of the super-human beings. He further clarifies that the central figure or the protagonist in a myth is always a super-human being. If he is, instead of a super-human being, a human being, then the story does not belong to a particular system of stories; it cannot be called a myth but a folktale. Myths perform a triple function; ritualistic, totemic and archetypal, and most myths, according to Abrams, "involve rituals - prescribed forms of sacred ceremonials" so the story about a protagonist in which characters have the greatest possible power of action can be called a myth. The ritualistic aspect of the myth reveals the element of sacredness, and the totemic element reveals religio-cultural roots of man. Among primitive people, totem was an animal or natural object considered as being related by blood to a given family or clan, and taken as its symbol of biological energy. The totem was above its symbol of biological energy. It was a symbol representing the super-natural protector, the god of the group and the group itself. The rituals produce the ontological transformation in the lives of the initiates and thus constitute fundamental existential experiences. The primitive man was in touch with totems through rituals; the modern man through dreams which are called the personal Unconscious.
Salient Features of Myth

The salient feature of myth is its flexibility by which it maintains its relevance to the present perspective. Simultaneously, it rotates on two planes of time i.e. the past and the present. Though it takes birth in the past time yet it surpasses the spatio-temporal dimensions. The mythical moment's palpable presence can be perceived even in future in its particular form. Basically, it is creative because from the primitive time to the present one, there is a continuous reinterpretation and creation of new myths.

And to consider myth as only primitive seems to be a wrong concept. In the stage of evolution, its relationship can be with the primitive mind (of course, a portion of the Collective Unconscious) that solders the past with the present.

It is an inseparable portion of the Collective Unconscious. As C.G. Jung has declared that the materials of myths lie in the Collective Unconscious of the race; the widespread similarity between myths results from their common inheritance. In the cultural process, the mythical feeling (experience) does never eclipse because every race tries to recognize its collective ego through these myths. Through the chemistry of cultural process, myth is transformed, carting the individual and the collective ego in the vehicle of novel perspective, and
it gains a dignity and dimension in literature and art. Due to its flexible nature, the gap between the past and the present is bridged, and it plays its significant role in the creative writings of eternal value. Homer's the Iliad, Dante's the Divine Comedy, Virgil's the Aeneid and Milton's Paradise Lost are such mythical creations which gain significance in one-dimensional mobility of time in the past, the present and the future. That is what Jung refers to when he says that the "primordial images" and "psychic residua" are "the countless typical experiences of our ancestors" which are inherited in the Collective Unconscious, and are expressed in myths, religion, dreams and private fantasies. Jung also attaches to myth the sacred origin. He finds a hermeneutical spirit in the modern myth. The world of myth is an abstract or purely literary world of thematic design.

Northrop Frye observes, "In terms of narrative, myth is the imitation of action here or at the conceivable limits of desire which means that myth is a structural literary pattern recurrent in literature". Jung, it is to be observed, departed from the Freudian argument based on instincts in the Unconscious. Freud used mythological tales as the expression of repressed instinctual drives in the Unconscious. Jung, on the other hand, insists on the repetitive psychological fixations rather than instinctual repressions, and isolates certain primordial images of our sacred origin, of existence, of God,
and of the universal human nature. "Hence the myth is the archetype, though it may be convenient to say myth only, when referring to the narrative, and archetype when speaking of significance."  

Anthropologists, however, base their study of myth upon "cultural pattern" by which they mean the configuration of tendencies which determine the response of the members of a group. But the difference between primitive and civilized mentality is not "absolute"; we live in the same world as the savages. Our deepest experiences, needs and aspirations are the same as surely as the crucial biological and psychic transitions occur in the life of every human being, and force culture to take account of them in aesthetic forms. Myth, therefore, because of its ontological status, is never the thing itself, but is always about some idea or fact. A range of possible human coordinates involving history and revelation always finds expression in myth which relies on an amalgam of social compromise between events of present and past. Thus it becomes evident that the "interest in archetypal patterns in poetry is often side by side with the interest in myth and the primitive mind."  

Myth, Legend, Folktale and Ritual  

Harry M. Johnson points out that "most myths have to do with the origins - the origin of the gods, of the world, of culture, of certain features of nature. Other myths are stories of exploits of the gods or exploits or miraculous events in the lives of religious leaders."
The story of when, where, to whom and under what circumstances revelations took place is, technically speaking, a myth.

As a summary formula, it might be said that by "living" the myths, one emerges from profane, chronological time, and enters a time that is of a different quality, a "sacred" time, at once primordial and indefinitely recoverable.

Most myths directly or indirectly depend on the cosmogonic myth. The myths of the end of the world, as well as the mythico-ritual pattern of a periodic regeneration of the universe are structurally related to the cosmogonic myth. As a matter of fact, they reveal not only how the world was created but also how the world can be periodically regenerated, and how consequently, man can participate in this universal renewal. There are other types of myths relating to

i. the gods and of other divine beings,

ii. the creation of man,

iii. the subsequent modification of the world and of the human condition;

iv. celestial bodies and the life of nature;

v. human beings of heroic grandeur and scale.

Although all the events, by and large, related in myths, belong to the fabulous past, yet it is possible to distinguish between a primordial epoch, corresponding to the very "beginnings" of the world, and the subsequent changes of that initial situation as well as its creation in the course of time in terms of history. If the protagonist
is a man rather than a supernatural being, the story is usually not called myth but legend; if the story concerns supernatural beings, but is not a part of systematic mythology, it is usually classified as a folktale.

(a) Myths are set in a time when the world had not yet assumed its present forms of human arts, and customs had not yet emerged; whereas folktales are set in the modern or post-creation period. 12

(b) In myths, the actors are usually of divine origin; most commonly, they are gods or culture-heroes. In folktales, the protagonists are frequently human beings or anthropomorphic animals.

(c) Individuals in a given culture believe their myths to be true; thus myths function as culturally sacred precedents for present actions. In contrast, folktales are not necessarily believed, serving principally to instruct or amuse.

Ritual not only affirms certain attitudes, it also confirms them. Sophisticated Confucianists do not believe in the ancestral spirits, but they approve of ancestor worship because it tends to strengthen the socially important attitudes, son for father, and of younger brother for elder brother. The effects of ritual tend to be heightened when the ritual is performed in public.
Myth and Language

Myth has taken birth in the lap of experience and not in that of thought. The meta-language of this experience owes allegiance to or is in association with the proto-language. In mythical language, there is no separate entity of the word and its meaning. The pointer is the point. The role of pointers is not semantic but magical (miraculous). Max Muller feels that mythology is the result of a "disease of language" because this language has various modes of expression - symbol, fantasy, rituals, metaphors, words, indicators and objects. And the binary opposition between the form and the expression creates myth. The writers, therefore, while making use of it, give to the airy nothing, a local habitation and a name.

The real ground of myth is not belief but make-believe. In Europe, sometimes, myth was used as an antonym of 'reality', but those races who believe in it consider it real. We do not consider our myths and legends as strange or alien tales, tailored for our entertainment but treat them as descriptions of real incidents and purports.

Myth and Culture

In his "Myth in Primitive Psychology", Malinowski thinks that myth is a hard-working extremely important cultural force. It is a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral
cravings, social submissions, even practical requirements. Finally, it is a statement of primeval, greater and more relevant reality by which the present life, fates, and activities of mankind are determined. Although Malinowski shows that myth is a strong preservative of tradition, he denies that it is a dogma. It may have the efficacy of a dogma, but it is at the same time plastic and dynamic. Myths are made ad hoc, they are "constantly regenerated; every historical change creates its mythology". 14

Myth and History

In a historical tradition, origin myths play a crucial role as they provide a point of commencement. In the itihasa purana tradition, the origin myth referred to or implied is that of the Flood. The Satapatha Brahmana version relates that Manu, the primeval man, was performing his morning ablutions, when a fish came into his hands. It asked to be reared and protected, and promised Manu safety from the deluge in return, explaining to Manu that the gods had decided to punish mankind by unleashing a massive flood. The story is repeated in some of the Puranas but with certain significant additions. In the Matsya Purana the fish is described as an incarnation of Vishnu - the Matsya avatara.

Curiously enough, there is a striking parallel to this in the Mesopotamian tradition. The story of the flood from Sumerian texts is remarkably similar to the version of
the Satapatha Brahmana in its details. Deluge myths as the genesis of cultures are, by no means, rare. What is of interest, however, is the particulars in which the versions seem to agree. It is now well-known that the Sumerian myth found its way via the Babylonian version into the Bible story of Noah' ark. It has also been argued that the Greek version in which Zeus sends a flood to punish mankind and the survivor from the flood is Deucalian, the son of Prometheus (or, in later version, Ogygus), is a myth derived from the Mesopotamian original, since the occurrence of the flood and the attitude of the gods towards man are not in keeping with the Greek stereotypes regarding natural calamities and the deities.

The doctrine of the destruction of the world (pralaya) was already known in the Vedic times. The essence of the theory is the cyclical creation and destruction of the world and the belief in the perfection of the "beginnings". An extraordinary vision of the passage of time, from the smallest wink of an eye to the vast length of the lifetime of the creator god Brahma, is depicted in the Puranas. Most significant in the scheme of Ages is the progressively decreasing length of years, which corresponds to a decrease in excellence and virtue among men and in the quality of human life. Every world creation begins in the perfection of the Krita Age, progressively deteriorates throughout the Treta and Dvapara until the final destruction comes at the end of every Kali - only to give way
once more to a re-creation in a new Krita, and so on. The most important function of these ages seems to lie in the negative moral judgement levelled on the present society. The complete cycle is terminated by a dissolution, a pralaya, which is repeated more intensely (mahapralaya, great dissolution) at the end of the thousandth cycle. According to the Mahabharata and the Puranas, the horizon will burst into flame, the Samvartaka (The Fire of the Cosmic Conflagration) will destroy the entire universe. Then rain will fall in floods for twelve years and the earth will be submerged and mankind destroyed. Sitting on the cosmic snake (Shesha) on the surface of the ocean, Vishnu is sunk in Yogic sleep. And then everything will begin over again ad infinitum.

Underlying this scheme of continuous creations and dissolutions appears to be a pulsating view of the universe in which matter and energy are periodically transformed into each other. In the cosmic sea, all phenomena lie in potentiality and wait for emergence. Once emerged into manifestation through the creative activity of a deity, all conditions of life gradually decline until they are once more completely dissolved. It is the continual inevitable process itself, that is prime; even the gods appear to act as only the successive agents in these continual transformations.

Today myth has become an encyclopaedic term variously interpreted by various scholars. Myth is an
expression of man's deepest concern about himself and his place in the scheme of the universe, his relationship with man, nature and god. Man's nature and destiny, which are explored in literature, thus form a structure of ideas, images, beliefs, hopes and fears, love and hatred. Eric Gould observes that myth is a synthesis 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 perennial archetype and metaphor, origin and end.\textsuperscript{19}

As a matter of fact, the sole function of myth lies in reconciliation of an original event to interpret and explain human nature in the modern context, and between the new meaning and the old event there lies an ontological gap which myth fills with an adequate symbolic representation. Myths apparently "derive their universal significance from the way in which they try to reconstitute an original event or explain some fact about human nature and its worldly or cosmic context".\textsuperscript{20} The ancient myths survive in the modern times with all their problematic intensity as they deal with the numinous and the sacred. To quote Northrop Frye, "In literary criticism, myth means ultimately mythos - a structural organizing principle of literary form."\textsuperscript{21} Thus we come to the conclusion that the basic contents of the myth lie in the modes that connect the 'archetypes' or the 'Primordial images'
or the 'Collective Unconscious' with human experience. In other words, myths interpret man's place in the universe. They are like mirrors that reflect man's inner self; they touch the dazzling heights of transcendence; they explore the depths of the Unconscious. No doubt, they are the products of creative fantasy, but, at the same time, they also stimulate creative fantasy. Myths always interpret human life, and in the contemporary context, they interpret the modern sensibility or the modern consciousness. The modern man perceives truth of his own self in the light of myths. When practised soberly, archetypal criticism can be very helpful in giving new insights into literature and into the human condition. But this conclusion is not always tenable since, finally, the judgement of a literary work cannot be based on the use of myth alone. But "an exclusive interest in myth", Richard Chase argues, "seems infallibly to lead to an exaggerated opinion on works which avoid this involvement and promise, the immanence of grace, of final harmony and reconciliation in a world whose contradiction it seems no longer possible to bear."²² One of the enduring values of the archetypal approach towards literature, however, is to remind us with Donne that 'no man is an island!'
REFERENCES


5 Ibid., p.102.


9 Richard Chase, Quest for Myth, p. 111.


12 Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 15, p.1140.

13 Quoted by Richard Chase, Quest for Myth, p.140.

14 Quoted by Richard Chase, Quest for Myth, p. 79.


18 *Vishnu Purana*, Chapter VI, Sloka 4, pp. 1-11.

19 Eric Gould, p. 5.

20 Ibid., p. 6.
