Chapter I

Introduction

The western world’s primary response to the literature of the colonised has been to identify and universalise the themes like colonisation, existentialism, and expatriation, without focusing on the experiences of the colonised. Colonialist discourse uses language to depict the coloniser’s felt sense of superiority over the natives. The natives are shown as uncivilised, lacking morals and the Europeans are charged with the task of educating and civilizing them. The deployment of the European culture as the standard against which other cultures are measured, is designated as Eurocentricism. Its proponents believe that it is based on the philosophy of ‘universalism’. European critical thinking defines itself in terms of this inclusive, unitary, and universalistic aesthetics. Its epistemology recognises an overlaid ‘centre’ that justifies the European imperial purpose. In interpreting or evaluating the texts from the ex-colonies on these terms, the Eurocentric critics have attempted to contain and constrict instead of liberating them. As Elleke Boehmer points out in Colonial and Postcolonial Literature:

On the whole it (Colonial Literature) was a literature written by and for colonizing Europeans about non-European Lands dominated by them. It embodied the imperialists’ point of view. When we speak of writing of empire it is this literature that occupies our attention. Colonialist Literature was informed by
theories concerning the superiority of European culture and the rightness of the empire. Its distinctive stereotyped language was geared to mediating the white man’s relationship with the colonized peoples. (3)

The colonizers have rarely viewed the societies, cultures, and literature from locations outside of Europe as independent entities, but have routinely considered them as existing in a binary relationship with the ‘center’. Such application of a universalist critical discourse has been resisted by postcolonial writers, like Raja Rao from India, and Chinua Achebe from Nigeria. In the postcolonial context a new reading of the novels of Achebe and Rao in association with myth is constitutes a valid attempt since both these writers try to bridge the gap between mythical thought and contemporary reality. Raja Rao’s creative engagement with reality is essentially metaphysical, whereas, in Achebe the focus is largely sociological, but both bear a consciousness that is rooted in the myths of the land. The mythic consciousness that emanates from their fiction originates from an uninhibited inclination towards redefining the cultural identity of their people. This tendency often leads them to trace the primordial source of their people’s cultural traditions.

Though Nigeria and India are two countries which are widely separated geographically as well as culturally, they share certain characteristics such as a vibrant tradition of spirituality and historical experiences resulting from their colonised past. The African and Asian narrative modes, as distinct from
the dominant European tradition, have supported the journey towards self-expression and self-discovery for writers belonging to the continents. The novels produced in India and Nigeria is intimately bound up with the life and the aspirations of the indigenous people. The presence of the spiritual in the Indian and Igbo world view can be taken as the common bond between the two cultures. In Indian and Igbo societies, every activity in social life is intimately associated with religion. Worshipping the forces of Nature, the ancestors and the Gods and spirits is a way of life for the Indians as well as the Nigerians. As such, numerous references are made to the various festivals and rituals in the novels of Achebe and Raja Rao. There is a philosophical basis to every action in the Igbo society just like it is in India and the sacred element regulates the thinking and behaviour of the people in both the countries.

A comparative study of Achebe and Raja Rao is occasioned also on the following assumptions derived from the ethical and religious peculiarities of the two communities: in the religious life of the people from Africa and India there is an ontological process which operates through rituals, festivals, and stories; there is also a bewildering variety of ways of worship among the Hindus like it is in the case Africa where there are about a thousand tribes, each with its own religious system; in India and Africa, there is much overlapping between the sacred and secular, the spiritual and the material things of life; in the worship of the Hindus, and a large number of tribes in Africa, each gesture elevates itself to become a ritual act of social
communion; in both the societies, communal activities are more often than not intimately associated with a religious act or expression; in spite of the differences in the practice of religion among the Hindus and the different tribes in Africa, there seems to be some common philosophical core - just as in Hindu religious practice, Igbo religion also maintains a main God with many spirits (as agents) who are also worshipped; in both societies, the beliefs, customs and the like are transmitted from the past to the present through the oral narratives such as stories, proverbs and folklore. Prof. Ayyappa Panikkar in his article, "Man and God in Indian and African Fiction" argues in support of a comparative analysis of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*:

> These novels reveal how close the gods are to man and they take us to a different world from the modern urban society of the west. These novels are typical examples of what may be tentatively called Third World Fiction where the structure of organisation is different from that of western fiction. (110)

Based on the similarities mentioned above and the overwhelming presence of myths and mythical elements a few selected novels of Achebe and Rao have been taken up for a comparative study.

The relationship between literature and society is very close. Creative writers and artists help to shape the future of a society or nation. The novels of Achebe and Rao demand a critical inquiry that would examine the process by which the faith, beliefs, customs and traditions of the colonized people
find its strong basis in myth. A detailed analysis of the vision and the aesthetics of these two novelists are called for and their faith in the role of their cultural traditions and their treatment of them also need to be looked into. There is also the necessity of examining their narrative techniques and the styles relating to the use of myths and motifs which help the reader to attain a deeper understanding of the nature of Indian and Nigerian literature at the ontological level.

In order to realize the vital role that myth plays in both the Indian and African societies it is important to know what myth actually is. Arriving at any single definition of myth is difficult. In Folkloristics, a myth is a sacred narrative usually explaining how the world or human kind came to be in its present form. Mercia Eliade, in *Myth and Reality*, argues that one of the foremost functions of myth is to establish models for behaviour and religious experience. By telling or re-enacting myths, members of traditional societies detach themselves from the present and return to the mythical age, thereby bringing themselves closer to the divine. Joseph Campbell defines myth as having four basic functions: the Mystical Function - experiencing the awe of the universe, the Cosmological Function - explaining the shape of the universe, the Sociological Function - supporting and validating a certain social order, and the Pedagogical Function - showing how to live a human lifetime under any circumstance (*The Power of Myth*, 22-23). Myth is a multi-dimensional, ever-present and an all pervading component of all cultures and as G.S. Kirk observes in *Myth: It’s Meaning and Function in
Ancient and Other Culture, "there is no one definition of myth, no platonic form of myth against which all instances can be measured. Myths differ enormously in their morphology and their social function." (7). Therefore, in order to understand the history and the people of India and Nigeria, it is important to understand the myths which moulded the two nations. Jung’s observations in this context are relevant:

Myths have a vital meaning. Not merely do they represent, they are the psychic life of the primitive tribe, which immediately falls into pieces and decays when it loses its mythological heritage, like a man who has his soul. A tribe’s mythology is its living religion whose loss is always and everywhere, even among the civilised, a moral catastrophe. (645)

The narrative in the novels of Rao and Achebe constantly refers to the collective consciousness of the clan or the conscious wisdom of tradition; the authors also present cultural history as myth which is embedded in a particular tradition. Their novels depict life in an environment of socio-political instability which, in turn, encourages a return to the myth. Both the authors demonstrate their astonishing artistic skill in fusing mythic consciousness with their imaginative vision to project the poignant realities of the lives of their people. Thus, the mythical aspect is an integral part of their writing and it enables them to present their respective cultures in all its richness, beauty, variety and integrity. The well-known social anthropologist, Levi Strauss notes the separation of mythical thought and science in the
modern world. This separation of mythical thought and science, he argues, started with Bacon, Descartes, Newton and the others, with science turning away from mythical and mystical thought. In *Myth and Meaning*, Strauss argues that myth, "gives man, very importantly the illusion that he can understand the universe and that he does understand the universe. It is of course only an illusion." (17). He believes that the mythical thought receded to the background during the Renaissance and the seventeenth century in the west. In the context of the Indian and African societies the case is quite different.

The fundamental choice before the colonised countries in Asia and Africa has been whether to prioritise the values of the mythical past or to embrace the competitive western system based on scientific thought for evolving a worldview to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. It is in this socio-political context that the attempts of Achebe and Rao - to base their novels on myth - gather significance. The effort of the two writers to retrieve mythical thought from a cultural past and to see the past in its totality dovetails into a gesture towards cultural affirmation.

In this thesis titled “Novel and Myth”, an attempt is made to explore, compare, and understand the significant use of myths by Raja Rao and Chinua Achebe in their selected novels; it is also an endeavour to identify their role in framing the history of the two nations. Using conceptual structures drawn from local traditions the writers integrate the cultural life of the past with post-independence scenario in their respective countries. The
use of Indian and African myths in the novels can be seen as an effort to graft them to non-indigenous genre. In their deployment of myth these writers seem to suggest that myth cannot be simply dismissed as an outworn fetishes or a heathen embarrassment. They offer a rich resource for cultures seeking a redefinition of their location, tradition, and identity. The novels of Achebe and Rao, with a narrative replete with proverbs, rituals, folk tales rooted in myth, infuse into the text a mythic consciousness that eventually also encompasses the relationship between man and God. The characters are shown together, rather than in isolation. Various festivals, rituals, customs are depicted as well and a unique style of narration is used to confer on the novels a status which is beyond the contingent, historical or anthropological.

There is no doubt that the English language has played a major role in colonial advancement. Throughout the colonial history, the occupation of new lands was accompanied by the imposition of the colonizers’ language on the colonized. Britain followed this procedure in both India and Nigeria. Gauri Viswanathan in her work *Mask of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* describes how Britain was able to impose English in India through the teaching of English literature in Indian colleges and universities:

> British colonial administration provoked by missionaries on one hand and fears of insubordination on the other, discovered an ally in English literature to support them in maintaining control of the natives under the guise of a liberal education. (7)
The Nigerian novelist Ngugi Wa Thiongo, in *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, tells a similar story of how English was imposed on Nigerian schools:

> It was after the declaration of the state of an emergency over Kenya in 1952 that all schools run by patriotic nationalists were taken over by the colonial regime and were placed under Distant Education Board chaired by English men. English became the language of my formal education. In Kenya English became more than a language, it was the language and all the other had to bow before it in deference. (11)

Raja Rao takes it upon himself to explain the paradoxical choice of the colonizer’s language for creative expression in his foreword of the novel *Kanthapura*:

> We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians, we have grown to look at the world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect, which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it. (3)

Braj. B. Kachru underlines the importance of Rao's admission in the context of postcolonial writings:
Rao's foreword provided a conceptual framework for understanding the creativity in English of non-native writers such as Chinua Achebe, Mulk Raj, G.V. Desani and Amos Tutuola to name just four writers from the Outer Circle. (582) Like Rao, Achebe also expresses a degree of self-consciousness in his use of English as a medium of creative expression in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* when he writes:

> The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experiences. (61)

Both Achebe and Rao bring into their brand of English a freshness that is steeped in native idioms expressions and phraseology. Their use of the language is at once particular and universal. The idiom carries the freshness of the native experience and allows them to underline the role of Gods, myths, archetypal patterns and many other expressions deriving from their cultural traditions. As postcolonial writers, they were able to subvert normative English with all its legacy of imperial power, and have used instead a different form of English. This process of abrogation and appropriation of English gives postcolonial writing a unique flavour. The writers of *The Empire Writes Back* believe that the bases of postcolonial
literature are cross cultural - where the process of abrogation and appropriation take place simultaneously:

. . . this literature is therefore always written out of the tension between the abrogation of the Received English which speaks from the centre and the act of appropriation which brings it under the influence of a vernacular tongue, the complex of speech habits which characterizes the local language. (39)

As Noam Chomsky has described in his work *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* “the nuances of the world’s languages capture the adaptability of man and prove that language is essentially an intricate form of expression that is in a constant state of metamorphosis. Language has an infinite number of possibilities.”(16) Language changes as the world and its cultures change, and that change, whether it entails the life, death, or transfiguration of language, happens not through fate, as some would argue, but through the individual choices made by the speakers of that language.

Colin Falck pointed out in his work *Myth, Truth and Literature*, that every culture "possesses myths, which express absolute spiritual ideals and most cultures possess myths which represent the actual earthly difficulties of attaining to such ideals." (143). He explains the mythic perception thus:

Myth is a form of integrated perceptual awareness, which unites 'fact' and explanation because it is a form of awareness in which fact and explanation have not yet become disunited. It is
a mode of perception or vision, rather than a mode of explanation . . . (117)

Originating from a primitive habit of the mind, myth is the life-blood of the contemporary literature. They are living parables accessed by the writers with archetypal vision. In the forward to Quest for Myth, Richard Chase writes that myth is “literature and therefore, a matter of aesthetic experience and the imagination, and as such, it is a fictional character which is imaginatively true.” (6). Mythic form in literature does not only create a mythic awareness, but also helps man to have a sense of meaning of things. Myth and literature are interlinked since both are perceptions on life and an analysis of the novels of Chinua Achebe and Raja Rao amply demonstrates this fact. The latter’s fictional mode is an attempt to reach an authentic spiritual vision, while Achebe, firmly anchored in the reality of the Ibo experience, presents the historical situation of conflict and change by adopting a narrative strategy stemming from a deep faith in the significance of the mythic in literature.

Through a comparative analysis of the indigenous discourses and a conscious tracing of the archetypal patterns, these novelists create a new awareness among their readers which finally becomes an affirmation of the respective cultural ethos. The freshness of native language is captured by them with the use of homely idioms and expressions, which again, offer new insights into their distinctive consciousness. It would therefore not be incorrect to suggest that both writers evince a strong faith in the mythical past which finds fictional validation in their novels under consideration, namely,
Kanthapura (1938), The Serpent and the Rope (1960), Things Fall Apart (1958) and Arrow of God (1964).