CHAPTER III

MYTHS AND LITERATURE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW.

The significance of myth.

The study of myth assumes great significance in our study of practically all aspects of human life today. The importance of myth today rests on the fact that men everywhere and at all times face the same basic problems and ask the same questions. For example, people want to know why they are and what they are, why nature behaves as it does and how cause and effect are interlinked. Questions of this nature seek answers which might help us arrive at some explanation of the 'how' and 'why' of the universe. It is true that science has tried to answer some of these questions, but some - like man's ultimate relation to the cosmos, the nature of life-force within and such other metaphysical problems - still remain unanswered. Secondly, man's desire to live in harmony with nature by means of some guidelines compel him to look for some kind of bridge between the outer realities on the one hand, and his hopes, wishes, fears and frustrations on the other hand. In other words, he needs some means to to correlate and understand the simple and known phenomena of nature and the complex phenomena like his defeats, victories, births, and deaths. Thirdly, man actually experiences life at many levels, the two most significant levels being the scientific and the mythological ones. This simultaneous coexistence of the two levels in the same man also
calls for some connecting link in his diverse faculties. Significant answers for some of the fundamentals questions and problems of human life and a plausible explanation of nature's illusions is provided by myth in human society.

Myths thus have come to assume a great significance as they play an important part in the life of man. So far as literature is concerned, the study of myths as constitutive of literature was made more seriously only in recent times. Some definitions of myths would help us clarify the notion of myths.

Harry Shaw defines myth as "a legendary or traditional story, usually one concerning a superhuman being and dealing with events that have no natural explanation". Shaw's reference to the traditional story and to the exploits of a superhuman being underlines two facts that he was working within the traditional intellectual contexts.

Alan W. Watts regards myths "as a complex of stories... which for various reasons human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life". This definition focuses on unravelling the mysteries of universe and of human life and is comparatively more complex than that of Shaw. Mack Scharer sees myths "as fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend". Scharer thus emphasizes the spiritual, psychological and metaphysical aspects of human life and unlike the two other
definitions seen above, his focus is relatively on wider areas of human personality and is therefore more comprehensive than the other two.

These three definitions reveal that basically myths are regarded as tales or traditions that seek to explain the place of man in the universe, the nature of human society, the relationship between the individual and the world that he perceives, and the meaning of several occurrences in nature.

**Frye's notion of myth**

In tune with the modern awareness about myths and their relationship to psychology, metaphysics, anthropology and so on, Frye naturally gives an important place to myths in his view of the myth and literature relationship. Frye has explained his idea of myth at three different places in his work.

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, he defines myth as "the narrative in which some characters are superhuman beings who do things that happen only in stories", "hence" he says, "a conventionalized or stylized narrative not fully adapted to plausibility or realism".

Thus, Frye makes two points here. He sees myth as a narrative not fully adapted to plausibility and secondly, he accords a kind of fictional basis to it. Frye's notion of myth here is akin to structuralist perception since he refers to myth as a kind of stylized narrative.

In his essay on *Myth, Fiction and Displacement*, Frye explains that
by a myth... I mean primarily a certain type of story in which some of the chief characters are gods or other beings larger in power than humanity. Very seldom is it located in history; its action takes place in a world above or prior to ordinary time. Hence, like the folk-tale, it is an abstract pattern. The characters can do what they like, which means what the story-teller likes; there is no need to be plausible or logical in motivation. The things that happen in myth are things that happen only in stories; they are self-contained literary world. Hence myth would naturally have the same kind of appeal for the fiction writer that the folk-tales have. It presents him with antiquity, and allows him to devote all his energies to elaborating its design.

Here, Frye sees myths firstly as some kind of abstract stories in the tradition of 'fiction' which are comparable to folk-tales and secondly, a traditional Greek type of stories involving mythological figures like gods and such larger than life super-human beings. And, in 'Myth as the Matrix of Literature,' Frye concludes that "myth is a word I prefer to anchor in its literary context where for me it is essentially and always Aristotle's mythos, narrative or plot, which in turn refers to the movement of literature".

Thus, though the word myth would mean different things in different fields or situations, "my contribution", Frye says, "is an attempt to explain what the term means in literary criticism today".

In this context, Frye raises a fundamental question:

"Why did the term ever get into literary criticism"? And answers it himself saying: "because myth is and always has been an integral element of literature, the interest of poets in myth
and mythology having been remarkable and constant since Homer's time."

Frye's assertion that myth has always been an integral element of literature is perfectly justified and acceptable to us since the concept was used in literature even by the ancient Greeks. In fact, it became a technical term of literary criticism since Aristotle's times signifying 'plot' which Aristotle held to be the most important feature of tragedy. It is no surprise therefore that today in literary criticism the concept of myth is finally settling down to mean the formal or constructive principle of literature.

II

MYTH -ART RELATIONSHIP

Based upon his view of myth Frye makes a broad division of all literary works according to the types of myths related to them.

Thus, he places all literary works into two broad categories: i) Fictional and ii) Thematic. The frictional, he believes, comprises works of literature with internal characters and includes novels, plays, narrative poetry, folk-tales and everything that tells a story.

In thematic literature, however, he says, the author and the reader are the only characters involved; this category, according to him, includes most lyrics, essays, didactic poetry and
Each category, in Frye's view, has its own type of myth, but Frye's primary concern is mainly with the fictional part of literature and with myth in its more common and easily recognized form as a certain kind of narrative.

Elaborating the notion of myth as a kind of narrative and referring to its use in literary criticism, Frye observes: "When a critic deals with a work of literature, the most natural thing for him to do is to freeze it, to ignore its movement in time and look at it as a completed pattern of words, with all its parts existing simultaneously". This approach, he believes, is common to nearly all types of critical techniques. But in the direct experience of literature, he opines, we are aware of what we may call the persuasion of continuity. It is that power which compels us to turn the pages of a novel and hold us in our seats at the theatre. This continuity, he says, may be logical, or pseudo-logical, or psychological or rhetorical. In other words, Frye aims at justifying the mythic force which sustains consistently this persuasion of continuity. And this way, one feels, he is trying to sustain his claim that myth is the constructive principle of literature.

Extending his idea of myth further, Frye derives an interesting comparison between myths and folk-tales. In Frye's perception, myths and folk-tales have the same kind of appeal for the fiction writer; he however cautions that myths, as compared to folk-tales, are usually in a special category of seriousness: "they are believed to have "really happened", or to have some
exceptional significance in explaining certain features of life, such as ritual." Again, whereas folk-tales simply interchange motifs and develop variants, myths in his judgement show an odd tendency to stick together and build up bigger structure.

Illustrating this point, Frye maintains that we have creation myths, fall and flood myths, metamorphosis and dying-god myths, divine-marriage and hero-ancestry myths, etiological myths, apocalyptic myths, and so on. "While myths themselves are seldom historical", he says, "they seem to provide a kind of containing form of tradition, one result of which is the obliterating of boundaries separating legend, historical reminiscence, and actual history that we find in Homer and Old Testament".

Thus, Frye's definition of myth concentrates more on the use of myths in literary criticism. It is clear from his various other observations that his notion of myth is inclusive enough to permeate and cover not only literary criticism but even the widest areas of contemporary thought, including anthropology, comparative religion and sociology.

**MYTH AS A FORM OF ART**

After discussing some of the characteristics and functions of myth and its role in literary criticism, Frye goes a step further and argues that "as a type of story, myth is a form of verbal art, and belongs to the world of art". He further remarks that "the total form of art, so to speak, is a world whose content is nature but whose form is human; hence when it "imitates" nature it assimilates nature to human forms. The world of art is human in perspective, a world in which the sun
continues to rise and set long after science has explained that its rising and setting are illusions. And myth, too, makes a systematic attempt to see nature in human shape; it does not simply roam at large in nature like the folk-tale.

Frye's claim that myth is a form of verbal art and that it belongs to the world of art is perfectly acceptable to us, for like art, and unlike science, myth deals, not with the world that man contemplates, but the world that man creates.

Extending the concept of myth further, Frye also argues that "every developed mythology tends to complete itself, to outline an entire universe in which the "gods" represent the whole of nature in humanized form, and at the same time show in perspective man's origin, his destiny, the limits of his power, and the extension of his hopes and desires". This means that the conception which brings together the human form and the natural content in myth is the god, who acts as the driving force in reconciling man and nature in humanized form and helps assimilate nature to human form.

Developing his argument further, Frye holds that the two great conceptual principles which myths use in assimilating nature to human form are analogy and identity. Analogy, he says, establishes the parallels between human life and natural phenomena, whereas identity conceives of a "sun-god" or a "tree-god". "Myth" he says, "sieves the fundamental element of design offered by nature - the cycle, as we have it daily in the sun and yearly in the seasons - and assimilates it to the human cycle of life, death and rebirth". At the same time, he holds, the
discrepancy between the world man lives in and the world he would like to live in develops a dialectic in myth which separates reality into two contrasting states, a heaven and a hell.

Thus, once again, Frye wants to project the role that myth assumes for itself, i.e. of reconciling nature to human form and at the same time assimilating the cycle of nature to the human cycle of life in terms of life, death and rebirth.

As to the use of myths, Frye declares that myths are often used as allegories of science, religion or morality. In the first place, they account for a ritual or a law or parables which illustrates a particular situation or argument. Once established in their own right, they may be interpreted dogmatically or allegorically, as all the standard myths have been for centuries in innumerable ways. A myth may be told and retold, it may be modified or elaborated or different patterns may be discovered in it, Frye holds that "its life is always the poetic life of a story, not the homiletic life of some illustrated truism". This means, in Frye's view, myths do not die or fade in course of time but continue to live even after they lose their connections with beliefs.

In other words, in Frye's opinion myths are not temporal in nature but have a kind of permanent life. But the moot question here is: What happens to those myths which in course of time lose connections with their beliefs? And how do they manifest themselves?

Frye's own answer to this question is: "When a system of myths loses all connexions with belief, it becomes purely
literary, as Classical myths did in Christian Europe". He further states, "Such a development would be impossible unless myths were inherently literary in structure. As it makes no difference to that structure whether an interpretation of the myths is believed or not, there is no difficulty in speaking of a Christian mythology". This means, when myths lose their connections with the beliefs attached to them they assume literary forms on account of their own inherent literary structure.

In this context, Frye further observes that "...literary shape cannot come from life, it comes only from literary tradition, and so ultimately from myth" and then concludes that "literature is a reconstructed mythology, with its structural principles derived from those of myth."

Out of these postulates, Frye is led to this conclusion:

Myth thus provide the main outline and the circumference of a verbal universe which is later occupied by literature and is thus the "matrix" to which "major poetry keeps returning"... In every age poets who are thinkers (remembering that poets think in metaphors and images, not in propositions) and are deeply concerned with the origin or destiny or desires of mankind - with anything that belongs to the larger outlines of what literature can express - can hardly find a literary theme that does not coincide with a myth.

In other words, Frye's discussion of myths makes us consider the relationship between mythology and literature.
We have seen that Frye is of the view that the structural principle of myth which depends on concepts of analogy and identity have in course of time become the structural principle of literature.

In other words, Frye sees literature as a reconstructed mythology with its structural principles derived from those of myths.

Frye illustrates this idea further by referring to the phenomena of the absorption of the natural cycle into mythology. This absorption, Frye believes, equips myth with two structures: a) the rising movement that we find in myths of spring or the dawn, of truth, marriage and resurrection, and b) the falling movement in myths of death, metamorphosis, or sacrifice. These movements reappear as the structural principles of comedy and tragedy in literature. In this context, he observes that "the dialectic in myth that projects a paradise or heaven above our world and a hell or place of shades below it appears in literature as the idealized world of pastoral and romance and the absurd, suffering, or frustrated world of irony and satire".

Evidently, Frye tries to show how the influence of myths pervades in different types of literary works, i.e. comedy, tragedy, romance and irony or satire. He then attempts to establish some kinds of relationships between myths and literature in terms of the literary genre and the literary conventions.
MYTHS OF CONCERN AND FREEDOM

In the Anatomy of Criticism Frye is concerned primarily with the formal nature of literature and its confrontation with issues such as the role of literature in society, the ethical ends of art and the social function of criticism, issues which he believes to be essentially a part of the general theory of culture. These conceptions, in turn, have earned him a label of being an exclusively formal theorist. Frye does not admit of this charge. He argues that "As some of those who write about me and are still asserting that I ignore the social reference of literary criticism the subtitle (Essays on Criticism and Society) calls the attention of those who read me to the fact that I have written about practically nothing else".

Frye has a valid point when he asserts that if one carefully examines the very title of his work The Critical path: An Essay in the Social Context of Criticism, one will find an expression of his concern for the social element in art. A critical analysis of the book reveals that it is one of the most extensive of Frye's essays in the area of cultural criticism, and its importance can be assessed from the fact that it treats a far-reaching body of topics, including things such as the difference between oral and written culture, Renaissance humanism and the critical theories of Sidney and Shelley, Marxism and Democracy, the idea of progress, advertising and propaganda, social contract theories and conceptions of Utopia, contemporary youth culture, McLuhanism, theories of education and so on. The topics appear
to be rather too diverse, and what holds these apparently unrelated subjects together is perhaps the dialectical framework of Frye's discussions.

A careful examination of the book would reveal that whatever issues he confronts are always set against the background of what he believes to be the two opposing myths of Western Culture: the myth of concern and the myth of freedom. Since these two concepts are invariably found to be recurring too frequently throughout his essays in this book and elsewhere, it would be therefore pertinent to clarify the meaning and the concept of these two myths in Frye's glossary of terms.

The myth of concern

Frye's idea of the myth of concern extends over a large area of human experiences. The origin of this myth is in the oral and the pre-literate culture and it is associated with discontinuous verse conventions and discontinuous prose forms. Frye maintains that "the myth of concern exists to hold society together... For it, truth and reality are not directly connected with reasoning or evidence, but are socially established. What is true, for concern is what society does and believes in response to authority and a belief, so far as a belief, verbalized, is a statement of willingness to participate in a myth of concern. The typical language of concern therefore tends to become the language of belief." He further observes that "In origin a myth of concern is largely undifferentiated: it has its roots in religion, but religion has also at that stage the function of religio, the binding together of the community in common acts
26 and assumptions. And elaborating the concept further he remarks that "it is deeply attached to ritual, to coronations, weddings, funerals, parades, demonstrations, where something is publicly done that expresses an inner social identity".

Thus, in his view of the myth of concern, Frye refers to that form of knowledge which is non-scientific in nature, that is, not based on reason or evidence but on beliefs. Frye's main point here is that beliefs play an important role in any given society and, therefore, all societies give rise to the myth of concern to explain the non-scientific form of knowledge available to that society in the form of beliefs or rituals. This also means that in Frye's perception, apart from the two kinds of truth apprehended by positivists and analytical philosophers, i.e., the truth based on analysis and the one based on empirical verification, Frye apprehends yet another kind of truth based on beliefs, religion, poetic vision and the like. In other words, Frye includes moral and intuitive perceptions too in the third category of truth identified by him. Clearly, Frye is reacting to the bi-polar view expressed by positivists and analytical philosophers for apprehending the world of truth or knowledge based upon analysis of the outside world of nature.

The myth of concern thus in a way comprises not only everything that is included under scientific knowledge but also a kind of disposition which leads man to uphold communal as against the individual values. A myth of concern thus has its roots in religion, politics, law and literature. Being inherently traditional and conservative, this myth places a strong emphasis
on values of coherence and continuity.

Referring to literature, Frye declares that literature represents the language of human concern and that is not a myth but is always the sustainer of the total range of verbal fictions and models and images and metaphors out of which all myths are constructed. In this way, Frye separates literature from belief. Literature, for him, provides "the technical resources for formulating the myths of concern, but does not itself formulate". Probably Frye refers to literature as a whole, a totality of verbal fiction rather than a form of expression.

This argument largely reflects Frye's notion of man's relation to society and social institutions and enlightens us on the role of the concept of myth in his scheme of things.

The myth of freedom

The myth of freedom is the other kind of myth identified by Frye in his exposition of the social context of literary criticism. According to Frye, this myth "stresses the importance of the non-analytical elements in culture, of the truths and realities that are studied rather than created, provided by nature rather than by a social vision". He further observes that "the characteristics of this myth are truth of correspondence, objectivity, suspension of judgement, tolerance, and respect for the individual".

In explaining the myth of freedom, Frye attempts to keep society and the social vision out and brings in man's freedom in relation to nature as the basic requirement of this type of myth and hence he stresses on such values as truth, experience and
knowledge gained directly by an individual in course of his interaction with nature as the main constituent of the myth of freedom. Unlike the myth of concern which involves beliefs, social vision and such other non-scientific forms of knowledge available to the society, the myth of freedom differs from the myth of concern in that it comprises non-analytical elements in culture and values like objectivity, tolerance, respect for individual and so on. In developing the notion of the myth of freedom Frye also stresses on such self-validating criteria as logicality of argument, impersonal evidence and verification as the means to acquire the knowledge or truth. And as the very title of this myth suggests, it is inherently liberal and helps to develop and honour all such values.

Frye sums up the whole idea of these two myths in these words:

There is the world man is actually in, the world of nature or his objective environment, a world rooted in the conception of art, as the environment is rooted in the conception of nature. For the objective world he develops a logical language of fact, reason, description, and verification; for potentially created world he develops a mythical language of hope, desire, beliefs, anxiety, polemic, fantasy, and construction.

This means he adduces the logical language of fact, reason, description to the myth of freedom and relates the mythical language of hope, desire, belief, anxiety and the like to the myth of concern.

Frye further maintains that these two forms of myths do not exist in isolation but often interact with each other. The interaction between these two myths, Frye maintains, develops a
kind of dialectic.

This dialectic is best illustrated in Frye's treatment of the two classic defences of poetry, namely those of Sidney and Shelley.

"The conception of poetry in Sidney", Frye says, "is an application of the general humanist view of disciplined speech as the manifestation or audible presence of social authority". For Sidney, what is most distinctive about poetry "is the poet's power of illustration, a power which is partially an ability to popularize and make more accessible the truths of revelation and reason".

This means, in Frye's view, Sidney equates poetry with other forms of verbal art so far as both serve the general purpose of communication. However, when it comes to displaying 'post's power of illustration', or to make the' truths of revelation and reason' more accessible, poetry scores over other forms of verbal communication on account of its distinctive features of expressiveness.

So far as Shelley is concerned, Frye begins by inverting the hierarchy of values assumed in Sidney. Frye puts all the "discursive disciplines into an inferior group of analytic operations of reason. They are aggressive, they think of ideas eluding them, because all arguments are theses, and theses are half - truths implying their own opposites..." He further says that "the works of imagination by contrast, cannot be refuted: poetry is the dialectic of love, which treats everything it encounters as another form of itself, and never attacks, only
includes ..." Frye argues that this argument assumes, not only that the language of poetry is mythical, but that poetry, in its totality, is in fact society's real myth of concern, and that the poet is still the teacher of myth..."In Sidney's day", he remarks, "it was accepted that the models of creation were established by God: for Shelley, man makes his own civilization and at the center of man's creation are the poets, whose work provides the models of human society. The myths of poetry embody and expresses man's creation of his own culture, rather than his reception of it from a divine source".

This means, in his reference to Shelley's defence of poetry, Frye finds values such as reason, logicality of argument, impersonal evidence, verification and the like relegated to an inferior position. In other words, he wants to emphasize the mythical aspect of poetry's language where reason, logic or any such evaluative criteria have no place.

Evidently, Frye's sympathies lie on the side of Shelley for i) Frye believes with Shelley that the language of literature represents the imaginative possibilities of concern; ii) both of them seem to be opposed to the view of Sidney that a critic as an evaluator makes a work of art subservient to the established framework of the myth of concern iii) Frye's observations are in tune with his general theory of criticism which scorns at value judgement in art criticism.

When Frye says that literature contains the imaginative possibilities of concern, he means that it displays "the total range of verbal fictions and models and images and metaphors out
of which all myths of concern are constructed”. Thus, he sees
the images, metaphors and models etcetera as the constituent
elements of the myth of concern of which any literature as a
whole is composed of. This view, it is felt, is analogous to and
in consonance with Shelley’s view of poetry which reflects on the
primitive and oracular mythology comprising the imaginative
possibilities of concern. Frye believes that an ordinary critic
looks for such values elsewhere or derives them from the myth of
freedom itself. For "the critic qua critic is not himself
concerned but detached". Frye here means that a critic should
not treat myth of freedom in isolation from the myth of concern,
because the myth of freedom subsumes the myth of concern. This
can be seen as Frye’s attempt to explain the dialectic between
the two forms of myths. In the end, Frye is led to the following
conclusion:

The basis of all tolerance in society, the
condition in which a plurality of concerns can
coeexist, is the recognition of the tension
between concern and freedom.... Concern and
freedom both occupy the whole of the same
universe; they interpenetrate, and it is no
good trying to set up boundary stones. Some,
of course, meet the collision of concern and
freedom from the opposite side, with a naive
rationalism which expects that before long all
myths of concern will be outgrown and only the
appeal to reason evidence and experiment will
be taken seriously... I consider such a view
entirely impossible. The growth of non-
mythical knowledge tends to eliminate the
incredible from beliefs, and helps to shape
the myth of concern according to the outline of
what experience finds possible and vision
desirable. But the growth of knowledge cannot
in itself provide us with the social vision
which will suggest what we should do with our
knowledge.
Thus, a review of Frye’s argument on the myths of freedom and concern in *The Critical Path* brings to our notice the following features of these myths:

(a) The merging of both these myths is possible;

(b) The merging of the myths of freedom and concern produces the social context of literature;

(c) In the process of the merger a kind of dialectical tension is produced between the myths of freedom and concern;

(d) This tension provides a base for Frye’s own central myth;

(e) The cultural phenomena examined by Frye throughout the book are interpreted from the perspective of this tension;

(f) And finally, Frye wants to lead us to the conclusion that this tension can be diffused only by the pluralism of myths of concern and that such a pluralism of myths can occur only in societies with open mythologies.

Our study of Frye’s writing on myth and literature brings into focus the following points:

i) myths have come to assume a great significance in the life of men as they provide answers to some of the fundamental issues in human life and often offer a plausible explanation to the link between men and nature;

ii) the study of myths is not of recent origin but dates back to the times of Homer and Aristotle. This means that myths have a permanent life of sort and do not fade or die with the influx of time;

iii) the importance of myths in the understanding of literature is particularly significant as they aid not only the study of literature as a whole but help in evolving a better
classification of literary works. Frye has amply demonstrated this fact. He showed that literary works are based upon the types of myths involved in them and he even went a step further to claim that myths not only constitute the integrating principle but also act as the very constructive principle of literature. This in itself could be considered an invaluable contribution of Frye to the study of the totality of literature.

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Chapter Notes


8. Ibid. p.587.

9. Ibid. p.587.

10. Ibid. p.597.

11. Ibid. p.598.

12. Ibid. p.598.
13. Ibid. p.598.
15. Ibid. p.598.
16. Ibid. p.599.
17. Ibid. p.599.
18. Ibid. p.599.
19. Ibid. p.599.
20. Ibid. p.600.
22. Ibid. p.605.
23. Ibid. p.600.
25. Ibid. p.36.
27. Ibid. p.36.
30. Ibid. p.45.
31. Ibid. p.115.
32. Ibid. p.44.
33. Ibid. p.147.
34. Ibid. p.66.
35. Ibid. p.67.
36. Ibid. p.94.
37. Ibid. p.95.
38. Ibid. p.96.
39. Ibid. p.98.