ABSTRACT

The novels of Chinua Achebe and Raja Rao demand a critical perception based on a characteristic sensibility that belongs to the Third World novelists in particular in order to appreciate their essentially mythic consciousness operating at the thematic as well as narrative levels. An extensive analysis of the vision and aesthetics of these two novelists, their faith in the role of cultural tradition, treatment of themes, narrative techniques and style relating to myths and motifs in the practice of the novel as literary form can help gain a deeper knowledge of the nature of the genre itself at the ontological level. The strength of these two writers stems from a fictional mode founded on a mythic apprehension of Reality, a characteristic trait fundamental to the cultural traditions of the
respective geographical areas within the Third World. The fundamental problem faced by the Third World novelist writing in English is to choose between the values of a mythic tradition and the competitive western system based on scientific rationalism in order to evolve a world view to meet the challenges of contemporary life. Both Chinua Achebe and Raja Rao, by reworking on a western model, fictionalize the fundamental urge in man to fill the gap between mythical thought and contemporary life. The novels under consideration Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God, Raja Rao’s Kanthapura and The Serpent and the Rope are designated as ‘Novel as myth’, for they create an atmosphere of myth by appropriate strategies in narration. The concerns for comparison are not the contents of the African and Indian mythologies or the structural similarity of the novels to classical myths. The significant areas of comparison in this study include the ontological priorities in vision, the representation of mythic time, the mythic configuration through archetypal characters situations and images, the hidden cultural paradigms, the philosophy and technique of the process of Naming as a literary device, the working of the sacred and the profane as conceptualised through fiction, and also the culture specific discourse strategies adopted. By locating these novels in a realm where myth and literature meet and interact, a comparative study of the unique narrative strategies adopted by these two novelists opens up possibilities for discovering a space free from neo-colonialist influences.

Chapter I provides an introduction to the approach adopted in this study by explaining the meaning of the term myth and how it relates itself to any literary narrative. The common cultural concerns in the cultural traditions of India and
Nigeria and the shared experience of colonialism provide justification for the selection of these two writers for a comparative study. The unique ‘Third Worldian’ perspective in the technique of narration place their novels in an intellectual space that could validate the significance of a distinctive Afro-Asian narrative tradition. The intersections of a literary narrative and a mythical narrative are mentioned enumerating the general features of a novel that could be considered as myth. The content, function form and context of a novel has to be taken up for analysis to prove that it fulfills the criteria for a novel, as myth.

Chapter II discusses in detail the thematic aspects or the content of the narrative that assumes the quality and status of myth. These narratives by relating the collective consciousness of the clan, or the unconscious wisdom of tradition, present cultural history as myth which is embedded in the respective traditions. 

Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God, and Kanthapura depict social life in an environment of socio-political insecurity which encourages a return to the mythic. It is the depiction of the operation of the sacred in the profane in these novels that lend them the status of mythified history. The term history is used here not in the sense of chronological events in the past, but as a record of the collective responses to the socio-political experience of the past. The protagonists Moorthy in Kanthapura or Ramaswamy in The Serpent and the Rope who respond to contemporary history bear with them the stamp of ancient India. In Achebe’s Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God, history is the hero with the protagonists Okonkwo and Ezeulu participating in the necessities of Ibo history, largely sharing
the aspirations of the villagers. Story or action is of secondary importance. These novels of Achebe and Raja Rao, present us with the true history of these nations from the inside by mythicising the collective experience.

Chapter III focusses on the archetypal patterns, characters and images which help to attain a keener insight into the meaning of the texts. The archetypal cultural paradigms like the Male Principle and the Female Principle, Purusha and Prakriti, come up for discussion along with the archetypal nature of the protagonists like Moorthy or Ramaswamy. The archetypal patterns of behaviour in both cultures are manifested in the novels through rituals, patterns of behaviour and also through symbols that relate man's existence to that of the gods. For instance the corporate nature of the Ibo and South Indian cultural environment are well reflected in the character of Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart and Moorthy in Kanthapura respectively. The guru archetype in the cultural tradition of India finds a very significant place in the structure of Raja Rao's novels. The guru-disciple paradigm is a recurrent aspect of characterisation in Raja Rao's novels, Kanthapura, The Serpent and the Rope, The Cat and Shakespeare, Comrade Kirillov and The Chessmaster and His Moves.

Chapter IV is devoted to a discussion of these novels as myth at the narrative level. The traditional concepts of time and the various linguistic devices used in the formulation of a mythic language are examined. The African and Indian concepts about Time are discussed and we see in the numerous rituals and ceremonies the operation of a mythic time or sacred time, rather than the presence of profane time which is related to the ordinary phenomenal aspects of life. The implicit
disregard for the linear progression of time as found in these novels testify to the concept of mythic time operating in the respective cultural traditions. The names of characters, in the four novels with mythic associations attached to them help in the creation of atmosphere. The names carry with them many layers of cultural or mythical information in both Achebe and Raja Rao.

The last chapter summarises the argument that these two novelists, through their unique narrative strategies help to reveal the structure and function of mythical thought in the respective societies. This study further validates the hypothesis that comparative studies of the narrative, linguistic strategies of writers from within the Third World will help to broaden our understanding of the past as well as the present. Broader questions like the relevance of the non-western rhetorical resources adopted by these writers in the context of post-coloniality can also be addressed in a future investigation. The literary concerns of these two writers from Africa and Asia, as seen in these novels, highlight the commonality of spirit which could be termed "Third-Worldian".