CHAPTER–I
AN INTRODUCTION TO MYTHOLOGY

Myth denotes "a traditional story, presented as historical, often purporting to explain some natural phenomenon as the creation of life, and expressive of the character of a people, their gods, culture, heroes, religious beliefs etc., any real or imaginary story theme, or character that excites the interest or imagination of a people. Mythology on the other hand stands for a collection of myths of a people, person, thing even, etc., by scientific collection and study of myths."¹ Myth has been described as "ancient traditional story of gods or heroes, specially one offering an explanation of some natural phenomenon, a story with a veiled meaning."² Introducing the mythology in general, Donna Rosenberg held it to be "serious stories that reflect a society's spiritual foundations. They are symbols of human experience that each culture values and preserves because they embody the world view or important beliefs of that culture. Myths may explain origins, natural phenomena and death, they may describe the nature and function of divinities or they may provide models of virtuous and heroic behaviour by relating the adventures of heroes."³ Although myths are taken as different tales or legends, yet scholars ponder over the matter and deduce that myths may include elements of science as well as elements of folklore. They even take these to be imparting a feeling of awe or wonder.

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whatever is mysterious and marvellous in life. No sharp distinction can be drawn between the myths and legends. Mythology in all its bearing betrays the nature of conceptions and practices of people to a great extent. The source of myths may be described as staying in the minds of human beings. Yet it is to be believed. This may be said also as sacred tale and its validity can never be questioned. Thus the basis of a myth can be narrated as the primitive aptitude of mind which regards all nature as an aggregate of human entities. Prof. Macdonell is of opinion that "a myth actually arises when the imagination interprets a natural event as the action of a personified being resembling the human agent. Thus the observation that the moon follows the sun without overtaking it would have been transformed into a myth by describing the former as a maiden following a man by when she is rejected."[4] He further observes that "mythology is connected with the former side of religion as furnishing the whole body of myths or stories which are told about gods and heroes and which describe their character and origin, their action and surroundings. Such myths have their sources in the attempt of the human mind, in a primitive and unscientific age, to explain the various forces and phenomena of nature with which man is confronted. They represent in fact the conjectural science of a primitive mental condition."[5]

Whatever may be the interpretation of the myths of a particular nation the essential character of these myths seems to be one of pointing out certain essential character of a particular civilization of any nation. It differs from nation to nation.

The common Focus of Myths

Scholars around the world are trying their level best to find out some common

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5 Loc. cit.
focus of myths. They believed that men apart from their own cultures enjoy certain common feelings. Out of these some are reflected in their respective myths. Reflecting on this common focus of myths Donna Rosenberg observes thus: "the first parents are often the gods of sky and earth. The creation-god usually fashions the plants. The gods destroy at least one world of mortals by causing a great flood. In the world as in nature, birth, maturity, and death are often followed by rebirth. Heroes are children of gods who have an unusual birth, possess extraordinary strength, kill monsters with the help of special weapons, embark in an arduous journey, descend into the underworld as part of their tasks, and have an unusual death."6 Belief in one supreme reality and other gods or divine powers who create life and control the direction of the universe are some common trait of mythology featured in many civilization. These divinities in these human form or in animal form are treated as anthropomorphic. This is specially applicable to Vedic mythology which treats gods mostly as animated beings. This is expressed by Macdonell in a better way in his treatment of Vedic mythology as follows: "The foundation on which vedic mythology rests, is still the belief, surviving from a remote antiquity, that all objects and phenomena of nature with which man is surrounded are animate and divine".7 Gods, demons as well as heroes play an important role in the formation of myths of the world.

The purposes of Myths.

Scholars hold different views regarding the purposes of myths. "Myths were originally created as entertaining stories with a serious purpose", thus remarked

6. Rosenberg, Donna, ibid, pg xv
7. Macdonell, A. A, ibid., pg.2.
Donna Rosenberg. He adds that a myth's serious purpose is either to explain the nature of the universe. (Creation and fertility myths) or to instruct members of the community in the attitudes and behaviour necessary to function successfully in that particular culture.

Taking interests in the creation of the entire universe seems to be the purpose of certain major cultures in the world. They believed that the universe was in the beginning in a most chaotic and formless mass. The gods then intervened and repartees them. The gods then multiply so that each can have his or her particular role in the universal scheme, and the creator-god brings life to earth in the form of plants, animals and human beings.

Some myths are explaining the origin of people and enhancing national spirit. While Some myths are dealing with the nature of creatures on this earth, and consequently interweave myths like that of flood, Human beings are not perfect creatures— even though created by the god. So the creator-god develops within him a passion for fashioning and destroying these creatures through a great flood.

"The heroic myths and epics of a society teach its members the appropriate attitudes, behaviour and values of that culture. These myths are of particular interest and value to everybody. Not only are they exciting adventures stories but in these myths we see our selves," thus observes Rosenberg. Thus in the formation of myths heroism plays an important role. They are the models of human behaviour of their societies. Although the attitudes of heroes are same yet all heroes are not same. Heroes vary because of their individual cultures. Although they are described as possessing

8. Rosenberg, Donna, ibid, Introduction, pg, XV
9. ibid., pg., XVI
extraordinary abilities yet they are not perfect. Their human weaknesses are instructed through their heroic qualities. Their imperfections allow ordinary people to identify with them. Just like heroic pursuits, cowardness is also another human trait which has been taken as a subject for some myths of the universe, some heroes are too keen to welcome death rather than living like a coward. Besides, the spirit of adventures also find a place in the world mythology. People of a particular civilization got inspired through these adventurous stories. Many of the greatest heroes cannot accept mortality. These heroes so fear death that even they are ready to undertake a long and perilous journey in search of the secret of immortality. Rosenberg refers to Achilles who arrived at a point where he was to choose between death with honour and a long undistinguished life. 10