MYTH FORMATION IN THE FICTION OF CHINUA ACHEBE AND AMITAV GHOSH

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ABSTRACT

In the opening chapter of the thesis, A Short Overview of Myth and Myth Criticism, there are three sub-sections. The first sub-section deals with a short history of myth criticism, the second one deals with the justification of the title of the thesis and the third one deals with the myth-ritual interface and to what extent the terms 'myth' and 'ritual' can be used as a part of a continuum. In the first sub-section, a brief introduction is given to the body of criticism dedicated to myth studies, starting from the classicals like Plato and Aristotle, to structuralists like Lévi-Strauss. An attempt has been made to give a literature review to the body of myth criticism in Western metaphysics and theory. We are aware of the fact that we are working with two authors who are not from Europe, but to say that only non-European body of criticism can be used to analyse them would amount to cultural absolutism. Also, we must keep in mind that both Chinua Achebe and Amitav Ghosh are post-colonial authors, whose cultural contours merge and clash with the coloniser's language and hence it is necessary that European theories are studied to see how their postcolonial discourse is getting shaped by the coloniser's culture. At the same time, we have reviewed the works of critics like Isidore Okpewho, Homi Bhabha and Spivak who are from the cultural milieu of Achebe and Ghosh. In the second sub-section of the chapter, we have gone onto a discussion about the use myth formation in the title of the thesis. Here, it has been argued that the very concept of formation is problematic in myth studies because to locate the point of 'origin' of a myth is difficult, as in an oral medium, texts are constantly interpolated, revised and reworked in anonymous ambience and hence to say that this is the original version of the myth can be fallacious. Hence, we have tried to argue that in their respective works, Achebe and Ghosh are also participating in myth formation by contributing their version of the myth in a
medium which is written and western. In the third sub-section of the first chapter, we have tried to show that myth and ritual are terms which are conceptually overlapping but not entirely identical. Myths are relegated more to the space of literary representation, whereas rituals are more prominent in social practises and they might be regarded as expressions sanctioned by religions to the existing body of myths.

In the second chapter, 'The sinister grin of Africa's idiot-kings', we have concentrated on two novels of Achebe in terms of myth formation- Things Fall Apart and No Longer at Ease. These two novels are suitable for a discussion within the space of a single chapter because they provide an interesting contrast in their timeline - the first novel is set in the colonial period whereas the second one in post-colonial era, and so a contrastive idea can be had about myth formation in two societies divided by the important event of colonisation. In Things Fall Apart, the entire Igbo society is driven by mythical narratives and beliefs that shape the way the "sacred ties" of the feudal, patriarchal order is held. The myths give Achebe a chance to portray the native culture of his community which has been racially stereotyped by Europe over centuries. However, Achebe also shows the internal fissures and cult of violence that is prevalent in the Igbo community, often practised in the name of mythical beliefs. The sacrifice of Ikemefuna and the near death of Ezinma at the hands of Cheilo, the head priestess, are occasions where Achebe critiques the role of village heads like Okonkwo who use myths to produce a culture of political authoritarianism and feudal absolutism. In No Longer at Ease, the setting shifts to urban Lagos which proposes the clash between ideologies of the youth like Obi and the elders, representative of the older patriarchal assumptions. Obi is the typical postcolonial generation; western educated and cynical of native habits and he dares his community by marrying an osu girl, a supposed omen. In forming a resistance to this myth, Achebe is forming the counter-myth of rational thinking which can be problematised in terms Eurocentrism.
The third chapter, 'And we will keep the darker legend', looks at two other novels of Achebe- Arrow of God and Anthills of Savannah. Arrow of God returns to colonial Igbo land and the chief protagonist of this novel is Ezeulu, who is the head priest of his village. Ezeulu, like Okonkwo is the patriarchal repository of his community, but unlike Okonkwo, Ezeulu chooses to politically engage with the British as he realises that it is impossible to protect his fiefdom without a political arrangement with the coloniser. He sends his son Oduche to the Church and gets him converted so that he can be the negotiator between Ezeulu and the British. However, this causes major problems to Ezeulu in terms of protecting the sacred narratives of the myths as the Igbo myths are antithetical to Christian beliefs. Oduche is taught that the python is the agent of Satan and must be killed, whereas in Igbo ties, a python is a sacred god. When Oduche kills it, there is a major protest against Ezeulu for his decision to send his son to the reprobates and destroying the sacred rituals of the community. The chapter tries to show how Achebe critiques the fact that how village heads used myths and rituals to their advantage in order to maintain the status quo of power. Anthills of Savannah is set in post-colonial urban Nigeria, where there is a synthesis of native and Christian myths as the postcolonial society has been appropriated to Christianity. However, through the protagonist Beatrice, Achebe critiques the patriarchal workings of the society through images in myths. Beatrice is envisioned as the new age Idemili - the goddess of water who must initiate her lineage to protect her identity against male domination.

The fourth chapter, 'Tyger tyger, burning bright', of the thesis looks at The Hungry Tide from the perspective of myth formation. In this novel, Amitav Ghosh looks at myth formation in the Sunderban region by narrating the myth of Bon Bibi. Ghosh narrates the Bon Bibi myth from the angle of a local resident, Nirmal, who has written it in a diary for his nephew Kanai. However, the myth is given its actual representation through the character of Fokir, who is a local boatman and a firm believer in the protective powers of the goddess
from the wrath of the tigers in the tide country. One aspect of any myth is its literary representation - either oral, or written, or both. But another more significant aspect of any myth is how is it received among the people because it is this communication that determines the functionality of a myth at the social strata. Piya is the Diasporic character, coming from U.S.A for research in the delta region on dolphins and then settling down in the Sunderban, unable to go back after the death of Fokir in a severe thunderstorm and sea-surge. Piya's perspective on the myth and rituals associated with Bon Bibi is shaped by Fokir's reception of them. Importantly, the two are alone in a boat and cannot communicate on the verbal scale as they do not understand each other's language. They can only communicate through signs and body movements, and it is Fokir's rituals to Bon Bibi that gives Piya the perspective on the myth. The social circulation of the myth is formed in the manner of non-verbal signs in Piya's linguistic space and this gives a new dimension to the process of myth formation.

The fifth chapter, *As though of hemlock I had drunk*, looks at the Ibis trilogy of Amitav Ghosh, which are all works of the twenty first century. This trilogy includes *Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire*. In this trilogy, the setting is the Opium War which was fought between Britain and China in the mid-nineteenth century. However, Ghosh looks at this history from a subaltern lens - he fictionalises Indian characters who participated in this war in various ways, as sepoys, merchants or simply observers. In this trilogy of commendable magnitude, Ghosh includes myths and rituals which were prominent in the Indian societies at that point of time, thereby using myths to construct social realism in the novel. One of the most prominent myths that Ghosh portrays is the practice of Sati, where a Hindu widow was expected to burn herself in the funeral pyre of her husband. This brutal side of patriarchy is reflected upon through the character of Deeti, who ultimately manages to escape with the help of Kalua. Another myth that comes up in the narration is the Vaishnavite myth around Krishna and his divine consorts in Radha and other women of Vrindavan. Babu
Nob Kissin, a clerk in Mr. Burnham's estate, wants to become feminine and appropriate the body and soul of a woman so that he can become a devoted Saxhi to Lord Krishna. He is initiated into this order by Taramony, whom he consider his divine mother and this myth serve as an opportunity to Ghosh to critique the heteronormative notions of the society. Apart from these, Ghosh depicts ritualistic songs and poetry that the coolies onboard the Ibis practise, partly out of fear for the unknown future and partly as an effort to preserve the cultural milieu of their native communities against the onslaught of the British officials.

The sixth and the last chapter, A Brief Comparative Analysis of Myth Formation in the Fiction of Chinua Achebe and Amitav Ghosh, is a comparative analysis of myth formation in the fiction of Chinua Achebe and Amitav Ghosh. It is stating the obvious that Achebe and Ghosh are culturally located in two separate milieus. So, the comparative analysis does not seek to look at the content wise difference in their myths, because that is an obvious point of departure. However, the discussion is mainly based on the difference in approach to the idea of myth formation in the two authors which is caused by their spatial difference. Both are post-colonial novelists, but they do not share the same approach to postcolonial ideology. The reason is not only the different histories of Nigeria and India, but also because of the difference in their timeline. Achebe writes immediately after Nigeria achieved independence and there is a compulsion in him to "write back", even though he does not agree with the hyper-nationalist discourse that creates a neat binary between the coloniser and the colonised. Yet, in Achebe, there is a need to construct identity of his Igbo community that has faced centuries of colonial and racial violence and so, myths become a narrative/aesthetic means by which he is able to form a notion about his community from an insider's perspective, though he averts attempts to portray the myths as entirely utilitarian. On the other hand, Ghosh does not have the need to form an identity for his community or other communities, because unlike in Achebe, the very notion of a community in Ghosh is fluid.
Piya is from the Diaspora, Kanai does not live permanently in Sunderban and the characters in the Ibis trilogy are always mobile, shifting from one community to the other. Hence, myth formation in Ghosh is simultaneously fluid, not constrained by the normative structures of a fixed society, but at the same time, they also reflect the desire of the characters to integrate themselves in a society by using myth formation as a marker of social bonding. This leads us to propose that Achebe may be called a Modernist postcolonial whereas Ghosh a postmodern postcolonial.