

Understanding Mythology: Conceptual Interpretation

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Abstract

The term 'mythology,' is (re)visited time and again from socio-cultural, political, historical, aesthetic, psychological and various philosophical perspectives. Though it denotes a 'fable,' it may be 'a noble and true account.' Cultural, historical, theoretical and philosophical studies present criteria and patterns of mythology. Thus, study of mythology is the most challenging and ambitious task. Mythology may be the source to understand history, social traits, life-style and attitudes. Mythology is a multilayered, multifaceted, multifarious entity and also may be the creations of collective imagination, understanding, empathy, interpretations. The progress from mythology to mythography is a significant development. History showcases that the trend(s) and tradition(s) of the translation(s) and transmission(s) of the classical myths has broadened the vision to look at the study of mythology.

Keywords : myth, mythology, culture, history, mythologists

Introduction:

From its inception, the term 'mythology,' because of its vast canvas, is (re)visited time and again. Socio-cultural, political, historical, aesthetic, psychological and various philosophical elements substantially contributed to the understanding of the meaning of this term. Basically, the term mythology came from 'Muthos,' which is a Greek word that etymologically means "utterance, speech, discourse, tale, narrative, fiction, legend." This wide variety of the indications showcases the broader nature of myth. 'Mythos,' basically means 'to denote fable,' whereas 'Logos,' stands for 'a noble and true account.' Literary and critical history, comparative literature, cultural, historical and philosophical studies discuss the criteria and patterns to understand 'What is myth and mythology?' 'Who is the creator and an authority in the field of mythology?' and 'Who has expertise in the field of mythology?' Critics, mythologists, scholars, historians do agree that study of

'mythology' is one of the most challenging and ambitious tasks. There are many reasons for this.

Primarily, mythology, at the superficial level, is 'a (stated) pattern of beliefs' that 'often symbolically showcases the characteristics of a person, hero, saga, event, or (historical) facts.' It is basically 'prevalent attitudes, perspectives and perceptions in a group or culture.' According to David Leeming, "Myths are for the most part religious narratives that transcend the possibilities of common experience and that express any given culture's literal or mythological understanding of various aspects of reality. To the extent that a religion is a system that lends authority to myths, a religion is a mythological system."¹ It indicates that myth is a complex term that envelops different streams of studies.

There are many functions of mythology, but its most effective identity is its order that indicates the reality of the significant

patterns. Mythologists and critics have always felt the need for comprehensive research resource(s). Without this, there is the possibility of partial understanding and prejudiced interpretations. But the vast network suggests, as Rose H.J. maintains “As a teacher of Classics I have often felt handicapped by the lack of a book of moderate length, containing an accurate account of Greek mythology, in accordance with the results of the modern research.”² Further Rose H.J. states that “We use the word mythology, to signify the study of certain products, of the imagination of people, which take the form of the tales. These tales the Greek called myths, an expression which originally meant words.”³ Considering this, it is noted by many critics and mythologists that understanding of the following questions in the study of mythology is must.

1. What is myth and mythology?
2. What is the nature and source/origin of myth and mythology?
3. Do myths change or not over a period of time?
4. Do literary trends, history, social structures, traditions and other elements affect the basic structure of a ‘myth’?
5. Which are the most prominent theories to study myth? Why?
6. Is it possible to present a comprehensive history of ‘myths,’ of any culture?
7. Are mythological stories a source of inspiration or insult of a culture?
8. Will or was there any culture without myth?
9. How to locate, study, interpret and propagate myths?

10. Are invented stories passed as myth in history?

Mythologists unanimously agree that each culture has its own mythology. These are sources of their history, social traits, life-style and attitudes. Scholars have identified the patterns of myth(s) that have affected/changed the styles to deal with certain facts and its own structural patterns. These changes are because of time as well as literary and other traditions. There are various critical theories to study ‘mythology.’ According to George M. Williams, “Myth’s ability to help one locate within the community’s worldview. Insider’s will find themselves at home within the worldview of their traditions myth; outsiders will hear or read these myths and find them strange and even “untrue.” That is the nature of being an outsider. For the insider, the myth will be validated simply in the experience of belonging to a community. For the outsider, the same myth will be objects outside of one’s experience. However, even the outsider can see universal themes-mythology’s timeless contributions to human reflection.”⁴ It proves that myths are useful that connect one to one’s culture and provide the platform to understand unique and ultimate endowments. Hindu, Mesopotamia, Greek, Chinese, African, African-American, Norse, Yoruba mythologies are studied by native people and scholars. Reference to the stories around Trickster, Orpheus and Eurydice, Theseus and the Minotaur, and others is important in comprehensive study of mythology.

Myths are the collective imagination, understanding, empathy, interpretation of a

group, class, or culture. Basically, these are infinitely different narrative(s), notions and ends. From Western Cultural perspective, “Greek Myth” is not a scattered entity of featureless multi-layered, multifaceted, multifarious entities and creations. Comprehensive studies from the ancient era have altered this notion and brought mythology to mythography. Scholars and critics have identified that there are many challenges in the study of mythology. The most prominent challenge is to locate and note the origin of a myth. Mythologists discuss the elements of ‘uncertainty, unreliability, suspicion and even (at times) dubious authorship/creation of myth.’ This may cause dispute(s). For critics, identifying the date or time of the ‘origin of a myth’ is a challenging and critical task. There are many reasons for this. Considering the nature of a myth, according to many critics obscurity, anonymity, non-recognitions and complexity of the text/manuscript of a myth are important reasons and challenges.

In the study of mythology, there are many traditions such as eastern, western, historical, philosophical and (Geo)political. These focus on the form, characters, setting, time, plot, motive and theme(s). If considered the trends in the studies, there is a challenge to demystify the uniformity in the mythic central ideas. Considering these elements, in the history of study of mythology, it seems that from the medieval era, many approaches and trends emerged in the study of mythology. The trend and tradition of the translation(s) and transmission(s) of the classical myths has

broadened the vision to look at the study of mythology.

Mythology: Concept and Concerns

Considering antiquity, according to a group of mythologists, ‘myths are the oldest surviving sacred texts that have served the purpose not only of entertainment but also of offering knowledge, social pride and proud history.’ In the ultramodern era, these sacred texts are preserved with special help of digitization tools. In the ultramodern era of AI, there is a possibility that this tradition of recording mythology will move ahead and cross the borders of the compartmentalities such as culture, social trends, history. It is also possible that advancements in ‘Artificial Intelligence’ will surely identify the space to include the popular characters or other elements of ‘mythology’ of a specified class/culture to other cultures. Or it may present the space to create a parallel structure of mythology which will be studied by the new generation(s) with special focus. Whether mythologists and a particular class/culture accept or reject this, it will create altogether a new aura in the study of mythology.

In the history of the study of mythology, it is seen that mythology is transferred to the next generation through oral, written and other techniques. The mythological stories are popularized through various means such as the visual effects and styles of the presentations in the form of drama, dance drama, audio-visual aids. These were disseminated for different perspectives, such as motivating, cross-questioning the opponent's cultural patterns, teaching history, following social trends. Throughout

the ages, such patterns are popular and make their presence visible.

Though such notions are visible in history, the pre-existing mythological stories are studied from different perspectives. In the ancient era, these were stories of motivation and all were proud of their myths. In due course of time, the trend to interpret the mythology emerged and it became the special exercise of the imaginative power, where the role of empathy and emotional rapport/prejudices subsided. Thus, the existing myths though (re)occur as the definitive myth gained unique identity where the socio-cultural and historical contexts were affected and (new) versions of stories entered. It was the result of 'collective perception/ understanding/ interpretation.' Most cultures found their 'own specific reasons' for the traditional and contemporary strength/valence of myth. As Edith Hamilton says, "We do not know when these stories were first told in their present shape; but whenever it was, primitive life had been left far behind."⁵ According to many mythologists, in later phases of the life of mythology, literary elements such as allegory, simile, hyperbole, epigram, euphemism, irony, persecutory played a vital role in myth-creativity. In most cases, it is the mind of the poet (or creator of the myth) that has developed the myth as it is now.

Study of myth may be a result of a psychological need of a class/group or even individual. It may also be a scholarly intellectual activity. For many it is even a way to express emotions, feelings, desires and needs. Myth helps to understand the classical past through which historical

contexts are presented. To avoid any misunderstanding, mythologists are advocating a culture where the reader, students, and critics in the field of mythology will be nurtured and classically trained. This will ultimately lead to creation of a proper culture in which comprehensive, apt and multi-beneficial study of mythology will be undertaken. This culture will surely take the study of mythology ahead of mere superficial, prejudiced, biased understanding. Basically, myths help to understand philosophical, psychological, religious and even spiritual aspects of life, as George M. Williams states, "All mythologies probe the great themes of life; good and evil, the purpose of living, death, and what lies beyond, struggle and suffering, challenge and determination, hope and perseverance."⁶

In the study of mythology, studying the origin of mythology is at the initial stage. Next comes the demonstration of the myth which ultimately leads to making the myth popular. In this process creative and artistic qualities supported by democratization, localization or even globalization of mythology are important. "Initially what begins as a metaphor, grows for some into a divine word that is literal and absolute truth. Just as inevitable, many humans have insisted on confusing the logic of history and science with the quite different mythologic or mythology."⁷ This proves the vast network of myths that might begin with divinity.

At times, the autocratic nature of mythologists or artists will also prove beneficial. From the golden age, to the era of the divine institutions, it is seen that

audiences, cultures and humans in general are possessive about the mythologies popular in their culture. Oral traditions, religious scriptures, folklore, folktales, folk songs, etc. are the ultimate sources where mythological stories are seen and presented. As they like their traditional mythologies, they might hate the mythological stories of the opposing/other culture(s) that have the elements which they feel are insulting to their culture.

As stated earlier, there are many reasons for the popularity of myths. The dramatization of myth was in vogue in human history. Because through this, their interrelations, social-political-psychological-cultural struggles, personal dilemmas, unconscious truths of human existence, and superhuman abilities are presented. From this perspective, myth(s) have significant factors of survival that will help a culture for self development and understand the patterns of the mutual benefits. In this process, the psychoanalytical theories will be helpful as it creates broader awareness. Mythological stories will help to understand, present and interpret the historical contexts. It projects the developmental stages of a culture through various literary genres in which myth is prominent. According to George M. Williams, "Mythology works best in the early stages of human and civilizational development. However, the larger questions about life and death have changed a little."⁸ Further he states, "The mythic way of addressing them was distinct to each culture, at that stage of development."⁹

Audiences of mythology look at myth from a specific perspective. In general, they try to understand whether the disturbing traumatic

historical events in cultural patterns have transformed or not?' And through this, it is also seen whether the subsequent and predominant identity is projected or not? Because of the subsequent versions, critics also study whether the prime elements of mythological stories 'alter(ed) or not?' If yes, why, how, when and what? These elements will be a topic of research, as the tradition of myth is 'rich and all-encompassing.'

Comprehensive study of the mythological stories might state the 'fragmented' identities. There are resources that state that these references project the study of the afterlife of antiquity. These afterlife additions, deletions, subtractions and divisions are complex; this must be sensitively (re)visited with great care. In this process, mythologists and critics do ask the question, whether it is possible to maintain the original form of the mythological stories or not? The artist's creativity, fantasy and fantastic world(s) are the obligatory resources or hindrances in this pretext. According to George M. Williams, "Myth speaks of various ways that life has come to be as it is. There are a number of explanations as to why life is so miserable (if it is)."¹⁰ In brief, through this, answers to basic life questions are answered. Thus, the study of mythology is multilayered and multidimensional.

Mythology may be a belief, fact for many. It may be a fact, but study showcases that for many it may not only be untrue but also baseless for someone or outwards especially. Thus, mythology may be fact or reality for some, and fiction and baseless for many. In general many mythologists do believe that

mythology may be reality of few, many or all, as well as it may be untrue, fiction/fictitious for few, many as well as all. Depending on the background this idea comes ahead. Thus, the study of mythology is very crucial and complex. Mythologists, scholars and critics do consider mythological stories such as Theogony, The Three Sisters of Fate, Prometheus and the Theft of Fire, Greek myths of Olympian, heroic stories of Odysseus and Heracles, stories of Trojan War and the Fall of Icarus as the references to present the diversity of the subject, characters, plots, themes, background, and other aspects of mythology.

George M. Williams gives reference to various terms in the study of mythology. The study of these terms is essential. George M. Williams enlists the terms such as : Anthropogony, origin of humanity; how humans came to be the way they are; Anthropology, study of humanity and its evolution; Cosmogony, Origin of the cosmos, how cosmos came to the way it is; Cosmology, concerning (study of) the origin of cosmos, and its evolution; Eschatology , concerning (study of) the end times; Theogony, origin of the Gods, how the gods came to be the way they are; Theology, concerning (the study of) the gods; Theomachy, a battle with or among gods (and demons); Soteriology, concerning (study of) salvation, or release from suffering and chaos. Scholars and mythologists have added to this list. Mythologists and critics have substantially added to this. This list indicates that the study of mythology is multilayered and multi beneficial.

Conclusion:

The term ‘mythology,’ is (re)visited time and again from socio-cultural, political, historical, aesthetic, psychological and various philosophical perspectives. The term came from ‘Muthos,’ had connotations such as “utterance, speech, discourse, tale, narrative, fiction, legend.” Though it denotes a ‘fable,’ it is ‘a noble and true account.’ Literary, critical, historical, traditional comparative study and cultural, historical, theoretical and philosophical studies present criteria and patterns of mythology. Thus, study of mythology is the most challenging and ambitious task. Mythologists unanimously agree that each culture has its own mythology and are the sources of their history, social traits, life-style and attitudes. Globally, mythology helps one to identify oneself as a member of a specified community whereas for the outsiders it may be strange and untrue. Mythology is a multilayered, multifaceted, multifarious entity and also may be the creations of collective imagination, understanding, empathy, interpretations. The progress from mythology to mythography is a significant development. At times, the nature of a mythology may be obscure, non-recognizable and complex. Thus, there are many traditions such as eastern, western, historical, philosophical and (Geo)political of the study of mythology. It helps to understand the form(s), characters, setting(s), time, plot(s), motive(s) and theme(s) of mythology. History showcases that the trend(s) and tradition(s) of the translation(s) and transmission(s) of the classical myths has broadened the vision to look at the study of mythology.

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