

Myth, Orality and Folklore in World Literature

With special reference to Tagore

“The thing truly worth seeing in world literature is the way human beings express their joy in literature and the abiding form in which the human soul wishes to reveal itself through the diversity of this expression.” Tagore in his essay on ‘World Literature’

Myth, orality, folklore, world literature and Tagore the range of the theme of this international conference is all-encompassing and extremely wide. Any critical analysis of a theme or a book for Tagore is an act of worship. In his essay on the Ramayana Tagore writes, “True criticism is an act of worship, *puja*. The true critic is a worshipping priest, who merely gives expression to his own mingled wonder and adoration or that of public at large.” Is not the Greek criticism of Homer or the Roman criticism of Virgil a *puja*? T. S. Eliot declared that the greatness of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards. The concept of *puja* is not an extraneous issue in criticism, but very much a part of history. (1) This keynote is an act of worship, *puja* of the theme of the conference.

Tagore in his essay ‘The Religion of the Forest’ says that Râmachandra, the great hero of our epic, had his initiation to the spiritual life from Vashishtha, the life of inner peace and perfection. But he had his initiation to war from Vishvâmitra, who called him to kill the demons and gave him weapons that were irresistible. Tagore says that reconciliation between these two forces is possible through creation. (2) Creation is the harmony of contrary forces--the forces of attraction and repulsion. When they join hands, all the fire and fight are changed into the smile of flowers and the songs of birds.

While explaining myth Levi-Strauss says that mythical thought progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution and the element which brings resolution according to Tagore is creation. The Sanskrit term for Creation is ‘*Srishti*’, meaning a manifestation or formation of something that remained occult. Time and space both lay latent in the timeless eternity. The phenomenal creation was only a projection of this transcendent eternity into time and space.

Some of the modern critics of myth have stressed that the myth is essentially related to creation. Says Mircea Eliade, ‘myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of

reality, the cosmos, or only a fragment of reality – an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behaviour, an institution. Myth then is always an account of a ‘creation’. (3) C. G. Jung similarly says that “myth is formed around a figure that may be a god a man or a process that repeats itself throughout man’s history whenever creative phantasy is freely manifested.”

The miracle of creation is to bring conflicting forces into the harmony of the one. The power which accomplishes that is known as the archetype or eternal cosmic principal or what Levi Strauss says ‘universal law of human thought.’ (4) It is not a shift from myth as a narrative story to myth as a way of thinking. Both are very closely interrelated. It is first an idea or archetype (*satyadharmā*) which becomes the basis of a story to be woven around the idea or thought and hence any mythical story (*devatakhyān*) rests on an idea or an archetype. It is explained by Jung as “the collective unconscious” and he strongly feels that when a man loses his mythical heritage he has really lost his soul. (5) Myth as said by Frank Karmode, “short-circuits the intellect and liberates the imagination” (6) which helps in deriving its universal significance by reconstituting an original event or explaining some fact about human nature and its worldly or cosmic context.

The question of reference or history of myth is still unresolved. In ancient Greece two main theories were put forward to explain myths and they are followed even today by some scholars. One is known as Euhmerist theory, called after its originator Euhmeros (300 B.C.) who saw in myths apotheosis of historical events related to human beings and thus Zeus was taken as an actual king of Crete, a human hero, who had overthrown the regime of Kronos and who was deified later by men and turned into a myth. Regarding the origin of Vedic god Indra, R. N. Dandekar has taken a Euhmeristic view, for according to him Indra was originally an war hero of the Vedic Aryans.(7). The other Greek theory upheld by the poets Epicharmus (6th C.B.C.) and Theagenus of Rhegium (5th C.B.C.) and condemned by Plato in his Phaedrus saw in myths, personification of various natural phenomena and thus Zeus was the sky, Poseidon stood for water and like that. Much before that it was Yaska, (7th C.B.C.) in a passage connected with the identification of Vrtra in his book of Vedic etymology, Nirukta, showed that from the very beginning there had been two main schools of interpreting Vedic mythology, the historical school i.e. of the *aithihasikas*, and the naturalistic schools, i.e. of the *nairuktas*. The former believed that Vrtra was a demon, a son of Tvashtṛ, the later, on the other hand, held that Vrtra is cloud personified or Indra is light personified (*Megha iti naituktah. Tvashtro asuraiti iti aithihasika*, Nirukta, 2.5.17).

But let me say in passing, as said by Sri Aurobindo about Vedic gods that they are no mythic barbarian gods of clouds, sun and shower, no confused allegories of

wonderstruck savages, but the objects of worship to men far more inwardly civilized and profound in self-knowledge than ourselves.....They had read the riddle of death and found the secret of immortality; they had sought for and discovered the One and known and worshipped Him, in their glories of his light and purity and wisdom and power.(8)

No doubt the ancient society, not primitive society, was the myth's proper milieu but it will be wrong to follow the Anthro-ethnological school of scholars like A.Lang, E.B. Taylor, E.Durkheim, Levy Bruhal and call it pre-logical and nothing but 'savage thought'. In fact, it is not savage thought but collective unconscious as Jung explains. For instance, the shaman calling out like birds and animals was not in a state of "possession" but signified at- one-ness or return to a prelapsarian (biblical time before the fall from grace) state of unified consciousness. For Kerenyi, "The going back to the origin and primal time is basic feature of every mythology." This is what Mircea Eliade calls sacral time. It is from this point or place beyond time, that society receives all its functions and sanctions and matters is not when they taught but what they taught and hence "mythological events cannot be judged historically" (9) because the power of the myth resides in a "more-than-historical reality."(10)

The word for myth in Indian context is *purana* and they are episodic. Here history changes into *purana*, so one cannot find a unity which one derives out of a cause and effect relationship. The *purana* keeps up its subterranean historical origin, but goes on adding, multiplying and expanding its body, aiming to bring home the archetypal meaning of the enduring totality. So Mahabharata is *itihasa* as well as *purana*. While explaining the term history as given in Nirukta, Yaska explains that the war between Indra and Vritra is not a historical happening but a symbolic event (*upamaarthena yudha varnabhavanti tatro upamarthena*, 2.16.2), however historical stories like Harishchandra, Nachiketa etc are also to be found. In other words *itihasa* in the India tradition is both history as is understood in the West and at the same time it is mythical history. Amarkosha defines *itihasa* simply as *puravritta*, i.e. events of the past (1.6.4) but the Indian tradition of Dharmashastra has given a specific connotation to the term '*itihasa*' which stands for a particular class of literature. The Mahabharata defines it as '*Dharmartha kama mokshanam upadesha samanvitam, puravritta samayuktamitihasa prachakshate*' i.e. *itihasa* is the narrative of the past but, at the same time, it contains teaching on *dharma* (religious and moral duties), *artha* (necessities of life. i.e., means of material prosperity), *kama* (fulfilment of desire) and *moksha* (emancipation). Since *itihasa* does not assert 'so it was' but it also reminds us that 'so it has been' hence *itihasa* literally ('thus verily it has been') is a narrative of past events, the recitation of which is a part of the process of self-renewal and regeneration. In the Indian view the 'so it was' aspect remains neither relevant

nor real: the most it can achieve is to stimulate one point in a continuum whereas the 'so it has been' view remains continuously relevant and real.

In *itihasa* the emphasis is not on the happenings, however true they may be, but on some teaching, on some ideal. Hence in Indian tradition *itihasa* is coupled with *purana*, 'that which is old and is still new' or 'that which renews the old' and hence timeless and eternal.

From the ancient time in India *Purana* stands for that which is new at the same time ancient, eternal and primordial. Shri Krishna is known as *Purana Purusha*, The Bhagvad Gita says, '*Ajo nitya shashvatoyam puranah*' (unborn, eternal, ever existent and primeval is He). In the Rgveda the same epithet is used for Usha – '*Punah punarjayamana purani*' (being born again and again she is primeval). (11) Malinowski calls it 'a living reality'.

Tagore uses the pauranic myths of Ahalya and Uravasi, in his two poems, to give an eternal archetypal meaning by juxtaposing the old with the new consciousness of the modern period. Ahalya recovers from a millennium of sleep, 'full youth bathed in a new childhood', 'blossoming on a single stock; rising like the dawn / from the blue waters of oblivion' is a myth of renovation of desolateness into life nourishment— an imaginative identification with the vast germinations that fertilise the earth or the human mind. On the contrary the myth of Uravashi as described by Tagore in his poem Uravashi, as an incarnate Eros, is "neither mother, daughter nor wife." She is the eternal beauty which is now lost in the modern world of falsehood and deceit. The pathos evoked by her unavailability in the world as it is – '*phiribe na phiribe na*, she will not come back, not come back' – is not to be found in the epics or the ancient texts. In two other poems Tagore imagines the beauty of the universe as divided into two separate forces – one represents by Urvashi and the other by Lakshmi, the two fair women who rose in the beginning of time from the churning of God's dream. Urvashi stands for that aspect of beauty which is seen in the flowering frenzy of nature and which, in the shape of a woman haunts startles and waylays man. Lakshmi, on the other hand, is the spirit of plenty in nature and of motherliness in humanity, leading men not to the bower of passionate tryst but to the temple of the divine love, wealth and prosperity. The archetypal meaning is clear that life consists of these two opposites and true creativity knows how to unite them into one entity to make life a thing of true joy and happiness and contentment.

As myths are symbolic, it has multiple meaningfulness; it is not unilinear but multilinear; it is not a fact but an experience of the self (the microcosm), his culture (mesocosm) and the universe (macrocosm). It is not a thought-out word but an experienced one, the being of the things themselves. (12) This experience gives a perspective which is not limited by the personal or historical subjectivity but is fostered by centering and unfolding of the individual in integrity and hence the Indian

mythical discourse has a holistic world view. It maintains that human affairs do not become intelligible until they are seen as a whole.

There are instances to highlight the point that Indian mythology seen in totality leads us to the conclusion that no part can truly be appreciated unless the whole is understood, and everything can be appreciated only in the light of human destiny. Just to cite one example about the significance of a myth in India is that the story of the myth entertains as well as instructs. Ego sustains man's separation from the Divine and with this separation being primarily responsible for the human fascination for wrong values, disenchantment with such fascination is an inevitable part of the process of progress. Dhruva in his previous life was a young aspirant, yet the luxurious life of a prince fascinated him for a while. He was born as a prince only to be disillusioned and to return to the sunlit path of quest with greater determination. (13)

The myth or the *purana* has a self-renewing, eternalising aspect which appeals to the Indian mind. The story within a story or the 'chain-tale' is a uniquely Indian form of narration used in the Mahabharata which makes the story timeless prototype of human existence. There are stories within stories and the thread of the main story is taken up after many narrations. Sometimes the main story seems almost forgotten or lost, but then it is taken up again which makes the narration move on the level of flux and timelessness. So the stories are primordial and eternal, indefinitely old as well as infinitely new.

In the Indian context it is the myth-making function of history that underlies its dynamic force in moulding the social life, morality and culture of a people. Accordingly, the mutable man is called *Nara*. The man who develops an urge for some creative action becomes *Narottma*, the superior man— the inhabitant not of one country and age but of all countries and ages, the maker of enduring myths and traditions and the bearer of the ultimate values ever projected towards which the whole creation moves. Then there is man, the deity— the goal towards which the whole creation moves. He is the eternal man, *Narayana*. So Kalhana, the famous Indian historian following the tradition of historiography says that the historian, resembling *Prajapati* (creator) must possess the divine perception of the past. (14) Tagore by referring to Ramayana and Mahabharata, in his essay on 'The Ramayana' says that they are also history but not the history of actual events, for such a history is limited to a particular period of time, but the history of timeless life of India. Other histories change at time passes; this history has known no change. Within these two vast poetic edifices is enthroned the history of that India strove for, worshipped and purposed.

One cannot deny that the operative sensibility of most of the writers of the world has retained the mythic origin of their historic sense, and as a result the critical idioms developed in literature probe the mythicity of human existence. It has become now all the more necessary because the status of words like 'truth' and 'reality' has turned out to be problematic. Myth has now been accepted as a meaningful unit of the literary text. Tagore's example is very apt in this respect. He says in his essay 'Silent poet, untaught poet'; that it is nonetheless true that on a quiet night, moonlight does seem to be asleep. Let them discover every minute scientific fact about the moonlight, let them even demonstrate that it is not a substance at all; people will still say that the moonlight sleeps. Which master scientist will dare call that a lie?

The next logical question is how this mythic knowledge is communicated? All the important Indian texts whether Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata and others were initially narrated in the oral tradition and still orally narrated by the story tellers and *dastagoi* of India in the folk form. Mahabharata was narrated first by Vaishampayana, then Ugrashrava Lomaharshini, then Sanjaya but the original teller was Vyasa. Ramacharit Manas has three pairs of questioners and responders: Parvati, Garuda and Bharadwaja are the questioners and responders are Shiva, Kaka Bhushandi and Yajnavalkya. These answers are sacred truths as they are '*santan ke vachan*' (words from saints) spoken orally at the four banks of the river. The fourth narrator is Tulsi Das himself who cleverly transposes all the queries of his readers to the story through these three questioners and becomes a part of the oral narrative structure. He uses the authorial voices of Shiva, kaka Bhushandi and yajnavalkya for engendering in the listener an ever-deepening understanding of life, death and destiny. These voices elevate the story which is a narration of events of at least one eye-witness, and thus turn history into *purana*.

The Indian narrator of the oral culture describes events for the exteriorization of the worldly process, and therefore selects a vantage point in the time past or the time present or the time future which enables him to frequently change his axis in time as well as space. This mobility gives him a holistic vision; time turns circular for him, and he talks with his total existence which may be described as orchestration of all the senses. On the contrary written culture is based on a cause and effect phenomenon, has a linear development, and deals primarily with visual symbols. The axis of the Western narratology is in the written text, and fixity is its main characteristic. Vedas are unique in this respect. Initially it was all oral but at the same time fixity became its main characteristic. In fact, because of auxiliary literature like shiksha, nirukta, vyakarana, kalpa etc, the Vedas offer an example of the written culture into the oral culture, and because of this inflexion it becomes the literature of the power class. Oral is for masses and does not believe in fixity.

Malleability is the characteristic of oral culture. The Indian oral culture takes the help of *itihasa* or *purana* or narratology to explain the Vedic truth. So the Mahabharata is the *panchama* Veda. Here you have many different versions, many discrepancies, stories within stories, innumerable legends and episodes, inconsistencies, irregularities but nothing affects the core which remains intact. The core or the nucleus serves as a string holding together numberless legends, episodes, discussions and dialectic portions. Here history changes into *purana*, so one cannot find a unity which one derives out of a cause and effect relationship. The *purana* keeps up its subterranean historical origin, but goes on adding, multiplying and expanding its body, aiming to bring home the archetypal meaning of the enduring totality. (15) So the Mahabharata is *itihasa* as well as *purana*.

Now the question is what the relationship between the oral and the written is. Are they binary opposites? Is there tension between them? Is the written privileged or placed in status in a hierarchical order? The moment we address these seemingly simple questions, a complex field opens up.

Both oral and written become the basis to serve as instruments of communication and dialogue between different levels of society and across regions but it would be fallacious, however, as explained by A.K.Ramanujan, to assume a notion of linear development between the written and the oral or classical and folk. It is more profitable to imagine a history of texts that is made up of written and oral forms contained within cycles of transmission that move up and down through time resulting in manifold possible recompositions within a ‘simultaneous order’ of texts. (16)

Aditya Malik reiterates the ‘simultaneous order’ of oral and written tradition and says that oral tradition in Indian context is not restricted to folk tradition and folk lore. While folklore and folk narratives are indeed recited, spoken, sung and performed — orality itself is not confined to folk traditions. In fact in classical and Sanskrit traditions one finds a prevalence of the oral word, in spoken and sung form, both in an epistemological sense — sound as vibration (*nada*) carries knowledge and metaphysical meaning as well as ritual efficacy (*mantra*) — and in a performative sense. Many Sanskrit texts, for example, Puranas and Mahatmyas, use narrative framing devices that involve a speaker and an audience in dialogue with one another. Even more so, several important Hindu religious texts, such as the Rgveda and the two great epics, the Mahabharata and Ramayana, are not only orally recited and transmitted for millennia, but once written, as is the case with the latter two texts, continued to show signs of having originated out of a possibly oral ‘core’ that coalesced into their current written form...(17) Kapila Vatsyayan by referring to Amartya Sen and also taking the cue from a sloka of the Mundakopanishad speaks of the two birds on the same branch as the ‘experiencer’ (*bhokta*) and the ‘seer’ (*drasta*) — and one cannot live without the other. (18) and then rounds up the issue by stating that the oral and the written are like two birds on the same branch: if the oral is sacred, so also is the written word. Let me quote what did she actually say, “May I draw attention to Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen’s book ‘Argumentative Indian’? He

has delved into the primary sources and other dialogical traditions. However, most humbly, may I say, these dialogues were also oral! This is quite nearly a case of considering *shruti* the word heard as primary and the *smriti* the word written as secondary. The oral and the written are two birds on the same branch: if the oral is sacred, so also is the written word.” (19)

It is not easy to draw a line between myths on the one hand and legends, folklore and facts of a remote past on the other. The primordial roots still visible in the oral tradition and folklores have been vital in the growth of the corpus of Indian myth and ritual.

Folk in the Indian context is *loka* and the *loka* and *shastra* (folk and elite) contrast is contrary to the western contrast between great and little Tradition. India does not believe that non-literate cultures are ‘Knowledge blanks’ which need to be filled in with the modern knowledge of different discipline and dominant cultures. A. K. Coomaraswamy, who many decades ago had written a seminal article ‘The Bugbear of Literacy’, speaks not against literacy but instead that elementary or functional literacy cannot be considered sole criteria for evaluating the total human potentials. (20) The argument holds good even today.

Cultures are never ‘blanks’. In some matters, e.g., in the ecological management practices used by tribals are far superior to anything we could teach them. The tragedy is that modernism has imposed a single perspective in dealing with human culture and today this kind of fixed perspective is challenged by the indeterminacy of experience. The search for the one truth in the many is at odds with the relativist experience of anthropology. (21)

In reality traditional Indian mind thinks that *loka* or *desi* and *sastra* or *margi* contrast represents two different expressions of the same tradition and not of different tradition.

These folk literary approaches are not liquidated or co-opted by core literary tradition but assimilated as alternative models of human expressions or as parts of the whole. (22)

In this way, classical Sanskrit literature describes, on one side, the core regions, Dakshina-patha, Kuru-Panchala, Madhyadesa, Gandhara and on the other peripheries like Naga, Shabara, Dasa and Kirata to share the making of Indian literature.

The main narrative view point of Indian literature consists of a classical core trinity. But there is no denial of the fact that the periphery in Indian literature is very vital and hence in Banabhatta’s Kadambari or Bharavi’s Kiratarjuniam, the periphery always comes and speaks in classical texts. For example, in classical literature, Shiva appears as *Shabara* in

Kiratarjuniam. Bana has a Chandala girl as an important character woven in his story. Similarly the modern writers use folk extensively in explaining the modern predicaments. (23)

The focus of classical regional trinity was to create something vital with the help of the periphery, and in the process, both the geographical region and the social sense were brought into focus, but by keeping it outside the framework of the caste system in society. These two literary expressions of core and periphery are always taken together in Indian literary context but of course not as a monolithic unity but as diverse structures complementing each other. Tagore by quoting a *baul* song explains that the distinction and unity are complementary to each other. A school of Vedanta philosophy which admits the truth of what is known as the principle of *bhedabheda* to indicate a belief that *bheda* or 'distinction; and *abheda* or 'unity' can co-exist and be in intimate relation with each other. (24) Substance and attribute, universal and particular, whole and parts, joys and sorrows may seem to be different from, or even opposed to, each other, but really there is no incompatibility between them, for they can be reconciled in a unity which pervades the difference and is its very being. 'Our joys and sorrows are contradictory', as says Tagore in 'An Indian Folk Religion' when self separates them in opposition. But for the heart in which self merges in God's love, they lose their absoluteness. He explains this by quoting a baul song:

I am the boat; you are the sea, and also the boatman,
Though you never make the shore, though you let me sink, why should I be
foolish and afraid?
Is the reaching the shore a greater prize than
loosing myself with you?
If you are only the heaven, as they say, then what is
the sea?
I lie in you, whatever and however you appear.
Save me or kill me as you wish, only never leave
me in other's hands. (25)

Orality or folk is never marginalized in India it is always an alternative tradition and alternative is not to be understood as "the opposite". If you want to draw a white line, you need a black or grey or any dark colour background, so it is a mistake to say white is the opposite of black or grey or blue. We have to make use of black or grey or any dark colour to bring out white in all its distinction.

Here in India the glory of "main stream" literature rests not by marginalizing but by accepting oral or folk as complementary. In the folk stories of the marriage of Shiva

and Parvati, the words of praise for Shiva are shastra oriented but the words of praise for Paravati who is the mother of the universe, are folk in content.

Similarly the notion of Shakti puja belonging to Anga, Banga, Kalinga and Kamboja regions gets absorbed into the Puritanical Brahminical orthodoxy of the classical core regions which felt psychologically assured to relate itself with Tantric Hinduism. These are examples of many such contacts between the classical creative mind and the culture of excluded peoples and classes.

To give another example of such contacts is the loom of a weaver or the wheel of a potter which are used to explain many intricate literary and philosophical theories. This process of socio-cultural interaction is a dominating factor in India's literary scene that swept all the regions, and with the passage of time, created different important literary movements including the *bhakti* movement, which fostered a sense of identity in the use of languages and cultural specificities, and the historical functioning in the context of the community. But, at the same time, the pan-Indianans of the of the content structure of *bhakti* once again established the fact that the unitary vision of art and literature consisted of profound speculations contained in the systems of Sankhya, Vedanta, and Yoga philosophy and transformed into the living harvest of the people's literature. In this way *loka* and *shastra* were merged together to reveal the essence of Indian philosophical discourse.

In Indian context oral, tribal or folk lore are neither the residue of the past, nor the behaviour of the uncivilized but it is the continuity of a rich culture and also a process of making the present more life worthy and along with *shastra* it gives a complete picture of Indian culture and thought.

Abanindranath Tagore came also to regard the folk arts and village crafts as the finest repositories of Indian tradition.

It was a conscious attempt to appropriate the popular in a sanitized, idealized form within the scope of the reconstructed tradition—to create for Indian art both the legacy of a classical past and the pride of an uncorrupted living tradition.

Notes and References

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4. The statement by Jung is referred to by Sisir Kumar Ghose, *Lost Dimension*, p. 18
5. Levi Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, p. 10
6. Frank Kermode, referred to by Eric Gould, *Mystical Intentions in Modern Literature*, introduction, p. 4
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9. Baynes, *Mythology of the Soul*, p.790
10. John Crowe Ransom, *God Without Thunder*, p.65
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18. "Two friendly birds are sitting together on the same tree. One (who is the bhokta or experiencer) is tasting the fruit and the other (who is only a drasta, seer) only beholds without eating." *Mundakopanisad*, 3.1.1
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