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GLIMPSES OF MYTH DOWN THE AGES



Vishnupriya Rajesh

Short Profile

Vishnupriya Rajesh is lecturer of English at Kumararani Meena Muthaiah College in Chennai. She has Completed B.A , M.A. , M.Phil. She has Presented a paper of "Themes in the selected poems of Dr.S.Radhamani" , "Translation as Creative Literature".



**ABSTRACT:**

The Roman invasion in the provinces of Britain has brought irreversible changes to the life of modern Britain. The invasion had an impact on the mainstream of existing culture and compounded a new tradition with it. A continuous line of inheritance and influence connects ancient Rome and Greece to the modern western world. These traditions along with their myths and stories played a vital part in the history of English literature. Myth of a community is erected on its pillars of beliefs, needs, magic and rituals. There is a plethora of myths prevailing in all cultures of the world with a characteristic stamp of their own.

**KEYWORDS**

*Scholarly publications and government communications , diplomatic documents , Homeric hymns.*

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## INTRODUCTION :

Mythology usually refers to collections of stories which are narrative in character explaining Nature, history and customs of people. Myths were originally told and retold by people as stories and passed on to succeeding generations. The source of myth is not only inauthentic, but also inaccessible. People generally speculate and have many views of the origins of myths. The main characters of mythology are gods, demigods or supernatural humans. Legends generally feature humans as their main characters but many exceptions or combinations exist as in the Iliad, the Odyssey and the Aeneid. When we talk about mythology in English literature, we cannot ignore its Roman roots. Latin and mythology go hand in hand, for Latin was considered the language of education. It dominated the intellectual and religious worlds of Europe for four hundred years. Catholics worshipped and considered it as the formal liturgical language. For the intellectuals, Latin was the lingua franca. Scholarly publications and government communications were in Latin. Churches preserved the classical literature. In this context 'classical' effectively meant 'Latin'. Latin works were repeatedly copied and recopied ensuring not only that they survived but that they continued to be a living cultural influence. Majority of books and almost all the diplomatic documents were in Latin. A significant portion of English vocabulary comes from Latin sources. During the Renaissance period, 10,000 to 12,000 words entered the English lexicon. The usage of Latin became stronger through its wide, vigorous and profound use in English literature.

Homer's epic poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey are the first in age and authority. Homeric poems derive from a tradition of orally improvised poetry. Both poems deal with the stories of the Trojan war. He created the classic picture of the Greek heroic age together with the meddling and quarrelsome Olympian gods. Hesiod, a contemporary poet of Homer, in his Theogony gives a full account of earliest Greek myths dealing with the creation of the world and the early battles of gods. His 'Works and Days', a didactic poem about farming life, also includes the myths of Prometheus and Pandora.

Homeric hymns were sung publicly on various deities, vividly retelling the stories about them. Pindar, in his odes uses allusions and a variety of myths. The audiences were expected to know the stories to pick up allusions. The tragic playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides constructed their plots from the Age of Heroes and the Trojan war. The stories of these dramatists were already familiar to the audience and reinterpreted them with contemporary issues and ethical debates.

Plato, created his own allegorical myths and attacked the traditional tales of gods, tricks, thefts and adultery as immoral and objected to their central place in education and literature. In Hellenistic age, myths were used for telling romantic and realistic stories. It was also a subject of scholarly studies.

Virgil is known for his pastoral poems. In 'Eclogues' and 'The Georgics' he includes mythological elements, notably the story of Orpheus and Eurydice at the end of 'The Georgics'. It is a didactic poem, about the farming life. Virgil's masterpiece 'Aeneid' is an epic poem in which he tells the legendary story of Aeneas. He falls in love with Dido who delays his ultimate fate of travelling to Italy. Divine interventions constantly influence the main characters.

Ovid, Virgil and Horace were traditionally known as canonic poets of Latin literature. Ovid best known for his mythological tales, 'Metamorphoses' is a deification of Julius Caesar, woven together in one continuous song. The 'Metamorphoses' is considered as a most important source of classical mythology. It was most popular for many centuries and important text in transmitting the myths to later writers. 'Heroides', one of his prolific poems is a collection of letters written by mythological heroines to the lovers who abandoned them. During the 'Ovidian age', mythical stories provided enjoyment for their

own sake, whereas in Chaucer's 'Troilus and Criseyde' and Henryson's 'Testament of Criseyde', the war of Trojans and Greeks were merely backdrop to the tragic love story. The Renaissance rediscovered the classics. They searched out manuscripts of forgotten Latin texts and reedited and published in their recently invented printing press. The rediscovery of classics set a new attitude and respect for classical literature.

There also prevailed a distinction in the treatment of myth. It was treated as allegory, symbolic romance or merely sensuous. Edmund Spenser, George Chapman and John Milton draw upon the tradition of allegorical interpretation, interweaving classical myths with Christian doctrine. In Shakespeare's 'Venus and Adonis' and Marlowe's 'Hero and Leander' myth is merely sensuous. Metaphysical poets like Donne, Herbert and Carew "were beginning to dismiss 'the goodly exiled train/Of Gods and Goddesses' in favour of more original and challenging subjects and imagery" (Miles 13). Scientific rationalism led to a serious treatment of myth. Joseph Addison in 1712 disapproves it by saying,

"...nothing can be more ridiculous than to have recourse to our Jupiters and Junos...Christian author to write in the pagan creed... would be downright puerility and unpardonable in a poet that is past sixteen" (The Spectator, no. 523, 30 October 1712).

Seventeenth century almost killed the myths whereas in the eighteenth century, there was a new scientific approach to mythology and religion. Scholars saw it simply as a cultural phenomenon rather than as pagan corruption or as a source of ancient wisdom. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and other Romantic poets dismissed the thought of seeing myth as childish and considered it as a perennially valid vehicle of insight.

In the nineteenth century huge volumes of poetry on mythological themes were produced. Tennyson's 'Ulysses' (1842) is a remarkable work of the century. Due to scientific developments, political reforms and industrialism the old myths in modern world was seen as remote and irrelevant thing of the age. But it thrived in prose rather than in poetry.

The twentieth century myth gained startling life and relevance. Scholarly developments in anthropology and psychology revealed the connections of myth to mankind. Sir James Frazer in his 'The Golden Bough', unveils his startling findings of similarities between classical myths and beliefs of present day 'primitive' people. The pioneers Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung emphasise the vital psychological importance of myths. According to Jung, "they are 'archetypes', powerful images from the 'collective unconscious' of the entire human race, embodying our deepest desires and needs; understanding them can help us to achieve psychic integration and health" (Miles 16).

Modern writers through archetypes and symbols explicitly expose the chaotic and shabby modern world. Even in the twenty-first century, translations of classical works and myths proliferate. There is no sign of myth going away from us. The future mythological study may surprise generations by throwing new lights on different facets of human existence. Myth and man are inseparable; as long as the human race exists, the myth will continue to exist.

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