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Influence of Myths on Literature Across Culture

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Abstract

Aims: *Mythology has been a powerful force in human culture for thousands of years. Ancient myths have shaped the way people view the world and offered explanations for life's mysteries, human nature, and the forces of nature itself. These stories, passed down through generations, have not only shaped the spiritual and cultural foundations of many civilizations but also influenced literature throughout history. They serve as a mirror to societal values, beliefs, and the timeless human quest for meaning.*

Methodology and Approaches: *This paper examines how ancient stories, especially from Indian epics like The Ramayana, Mahabharata and various Puranas, continue to influence literature today and shape our outlook on life, relationships, and human behaviour. These myths, though deeply rooted in religious traditions, transcend their original contexts to become universal metaphors that offer insight into human existence, morality, and identity.*

Outcome: *Mythology has long been a significant source of inspiration for literature, influencing writers and shaping their narrative structures, characterizations, and thematic explorations. Authors across time have drawn on myth to explore ethical dilemmas, human psychology, divine intervention, and the cosmic struggle between order and chaos.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *It suggests a need for renewed attention to mythological frameworks within academic and creative writing, highlighting their relevance in promoting intercultural literacy, ethical reflection, and a deeper understanding of universal human concerns.*

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Mythology and literature have always shared a deep, symbiotic relationship. From the epics of ancient civilizations to the modern literary masterpieces, mythological stories have continuously inspired and influenced writers. Myths, whether from the Indian subcontinent, ancient Greece, or other cultural traditions, delve into universal themes that remain relevant even in contemporary literature. This paper aims to explore how mythological stories shape our understanding of human nature, divine interventions, and societal norms.

The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are prime examples of Indian literature, where Gods, heroes, and epic battles are central. Similarly, Greek and Roman myths, like the tales of Prometheus or Hercules, have shaped Western literary traditions. These ancient stories, while deeply rooted in cultural and religious contexts, speak to human struggles that transcend time and place. As such, they continue to shape modern literary narratives and offer timeless reflections on the human condition.

One of the most significant aspects of mythology is the presence of Gods and divine interventions. In Indian epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the Gods play a central role in shaping the destinies of humans. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are filled with instances where Gods directly influence human affairs. Krishna's role in the *Mahabharata* is particularly significant. He is not just a wise counselor; he is a divine strategist, a guide, and an avatar of Vishnu. His counsel to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* is a profound philosophical discourse on duty, righteousness, and the nature of the self, delivered on the battlefield as a divine intervention at a critical moment.

Rama, in the *Ramayana*, is another avatar of Vishnu, embodying ideal virtue and righteousness. His battles against Ravana are not just a clash between good and evil; they are a cosmic struggle where divine forces ensure the triumph of dharma. The concept of avatars, divine beings incarnated as humans, underscores the belief that gods actively intervene to restore balance and uphold cosmic order. These mythological narratives serve to explain the unpredictable nature of life. They offer a framework for understanding natural disasters, personal tragedies, and moments of extraordinary fortune. They reinforce the idea that humans are not entirely in control of their destinies, that there are forces greater than themselves at play. This belief in divine intervention shaped ancient

societies, influencing their moral codes, religious practices, and social structures. It is a testament to humanity's enduring need to find meaning and order in a chaotic world.

In Greek mythology, Gods such as Zeus and Athena are constantly intervening in human affairs. Zeus, the king of the Gods, wielded thunderbolts and dictated fate, while Poseidon commanded the seas, and Athena guided wisdom and warfare. These Gods are not distant, abstract figures; they are active participants in human affairs, their emotions and actions directly impacting the lives of mortals. The *Iliad*, for instance, is rife with divine intervention. The Trojan War is not just a conflict between humans; it is a battleground for the Gods themselves. Hera and Athena favoured the Greeks, while Apollo and Ares supported the Trojans. Their personal grudges, alliances, and whims directly influence the course of battles, the fates of heroes, and the outcomes of sieges. Achilles' rage, a central theme of the epic, is amplified by the Gods' manipulations which highlights the vulnerability of mortals to divine influence.

Prometheus, the Titan, defies Zeus by giving fire to humanity which symbolizes defiance against divine authority and the struggle for knowledge. This divine intervention mirrors the conflicts in human life, where humans often face moral dilemmas and the consequences of their choices. Writers across cultures have drawn upon these myths to explore themes of fate, free will, and the interplay between divine will and human action.

Indian mythology has influenced a wide range of literary works, both in India and around the world. The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have inspired numerous adaptations, retellings, and reimaginations in modern literature. For instance, in contemporary Indian literature, the themes of duty, sacrifice, and moral dilemmas from the *Mahabharata* have been reinterpreted in novels such as *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, which retells the story of the *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Draupadi and *The Forest of Enchantments*, which tells the *Ramayana* from Sita's point of view. The texts give voice to women who have often been marginalized or silenced in traditional narratives. Divakaruni's reinterpretations explore the emotional and psychological experiences of these women and offer new insights into their motivations, struggles, and triumphs. She brings a contemporary feminist lens to ancient

stories, challenging traditional interpretations and highlights the enduring relevance of these narratives in addressing issues of gender, power, and identity.

Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* is a prime example of this reimagining. He takes the powerful figure of Shiva, traditionally seen as a destroyer god, and presents him as a human hero, a tribal leader who rises to become a god through his actions and virtues. This humanization of a divine figure makes the ancient myth relatable to modern readers and allows them to connect with the themes of leadership, duty, and the struggle against evil. Tripathi's work sparks new conversations about the nature of divinity, the role of heroes, and the relevance of ancient wisdom in a modern context.

Indian mythology has also made its mark in global literature. The ideas of karma (action) and moksha (liberation) continue to resonate in works such as *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, where the protagonist's journey mirrors a spiritual quest similar to that of the characters in Indian myths. These modern interpretations reveal how ancient stories continue to speak to contemporary concerns about fate, justice, and the human soul's journey.

Greek and Roman myths have been a dominant influence in British literature. From the Renaissance to the present day, classical myths have provided a rich source of inspiration for poets, playwrights, and novelists. Shakespeare, for instance, drew heavily from classical mythology in his plays. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* features characters like Titania and Oberon, who are rooted in classical folklore, blended with Shakespeare's own imaginative creations. The play explores themes of love, illusion, and the supernatural, using mythological elements to create a magical and enchanting world. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare incorporates figures from Roman mythology such as Neptune and Juno and explores themes of power, revenge, and reconciliation. Thus, Shakespeare's use of classical myths demonstrates his ability to adapt and transform these ancient stories, making them relevant to his own time and audience.

Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is a play that combines elements of Renaissance thinking with ancient myths. The play tells the story of Dr. Faustus, a man who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for magical powers and worldly knowledge. Throughout the play, Marlowe uses several myths to illustrate themes of temptation, power, and the consequences of human ambition. The central myth

is that of Faust, a scholar who makes a pact with the devil for power, echoing the legend of a man seeking knowledge beyond human limits, leading to his tragic downfall. The myth of Icarus, who flies too close to the sun and falls to his death, mirrors Faustus's reckless ambition, while the story of Lucifer's fall warns of the dangers of pride and rebellion, "His waxen wings did mount above his reach," "And, melting, Heavens conspired his overthrow;" (1)

Additionally, the character of Helen of Troy appears as an illusion. She is a symbol of beauty and desire, but her appearance in the play is also a symbol of Faustus's moral decline. In Greek mythology, Helen is the most beautiful woman in the world, and her beauty causes the Trojan War. Faustus's desire for her, even though she is just an illusion, represents his longing for unattainable pleasures and worldly desires.

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* offers an elaborate reinterpretation of the story of Satan's fall from grace, drawing heavily from both biblical and classical mythological sources. Milton's portrayal of Satan as a tragic hero echoes themes of hubris and rebellion found in figures like Prometheus, who challenges the Gods. The enduring influence of Greek and Roman myths in British literature reveals how ancient stories shape our cultural understanding of morality, power, and the consequences of defying divine authority.

The Romantic and Victorian eras saw a resurgence of interest in mythology, a deep dive into the ancient narratives that offered a stark contrast to the rapidly changing world of industrialization and scientific advancement. For the Romantics, mythology was a source of untamed imagination, a realm of beauty and wonder that resonated with their yearning for the sublime.

John Keats, a quintessential Romantic poet, found profound inspiration in Greek mythology. His Odes, including *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *Ode to Psyche*, and others, are filled with references to Greek and Roman mythology. His *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is a testament to this fascination, where he contemplates the eternal beauty and timelessness of art, using the imagery of an ancient Greek urn as a springboard for his reflections. In *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats uses Greek mythology to explore themes of death, immortality, and the fleeting nature of life. He references the myth of Philomela, a woman transformed into a nightingale after suffering a tragic fate, to connect the bird with the idea of

escape from pain and death. The speaker begins by describing a deep sense of numbness, as if he has drunk poison like Socrates, and is slowly sinking into oblivion. He also refers to the river Lethe, which causes forgetfulness in Greek mythology, as he imagines escaping into the world of the nightingale. The bird is compared to a "Dryad" from Greek myth, symbolizing the beauty and eternity of nature. The speaker wishes to join the bird in its journey, escaping human suffering and finding peace in death. He dreams of the mythical Hippocrene spring, known for inspiring poets, and imagines flying away with the nightingale on wings of poetry, leaving behind the pain of life. As the nightingale sings, the speaker is comforted by the idea of death, but he is also aware that the bird is immortal and has sung through the ages, offering its song to both emperors and ordinary people. However, as the bird flies away, the speaker is left wondering if his experience was a dream or reality. This mixture of myth and reality shows Keats' deep connection to Greek culture and mythology, which influences his work and adds layers of meaning to his poetry:

That thou, light winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease. (107)

In *Ode to Psyche*, Keats uses the myth of Psyche, the wife of Cupid, to explore themes of beauty, love, and the power of the mind. According to the myth, Psyche is a beautiful princess whose beauty causes people to ignore the goddess Aphrodite, leading Aphrodite to send her son Cupid to make Psyche fall in love with a hideous monster. However, Cupid falls in love with Psyche himself. Psyche eventually discovers that her mysterious husband is Cupid, and after a betrayal, the couple is separated but later reunited after Psyche proves herself through difficult tasks. Keats begins the poem by expressing his desire to become Psyche's priest, as she is the most beautiful yet least worshipped goddess. Rather than creating a physical shrine, he decides to dedicate a special place in his mind to worship her beauty. Through this, Keats reflects the Romantic idea that the mind has the power to perceive beauty beyond the physical world. This myth also connects to the idea of "psychology," the study of the mind, as the poem celebrates the beauty found within one's mental and emotional world. Thus

Keats's poetry is filled with mythological allusions, from the nymphs and satyrs to the gods and heroes, each representing a facet of human emotion and experience. He saw in these myths a connection to a world untouched by the modern age, a world of pure beauty and unbridled passion.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, another prominent Romantic, used mythology as a vehicle for his revolutionary ideals. His *Prometheus Unbound* reimagines the myth of Prometheus as a symbol of human rebellion against tyranny. Shelley's Prometheus is not just a Titan suffering for humanity; he is a force of liberation, a champion of freedom against oppressive powers. This reimagining of the myth reflects Shelley's own radical beliefs and his vision of a world where humanity is free from oppression. The Romantic poets used mythology to explore themes of nature, emotion, and the human spirit, finding in these ancient stories a language to express their deepest longings and aspirations.

The Victorian era, while marked by industrial progress and social change, also saw a renewed interest in mythology. Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Ulysses* is a prime example of this Victorian engagement with classical myths. Tennyson's Ulysses is not the weary hero of Homer's *Odyssey*; he is a symbol of the Victorian spirit of exploration and resilience, a man driven by an insatiable desire to seek new knowledge and experiences. This reimagining of Ulysses reflects the Victorian era's drive to expand its horizons, to conquer new frontiers, and to push the boundaries of human achievement.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of Victorian artists, also drew heavily from mythology in their paintings. Artists like Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti depicted scenes from classical myths with meticulous detail and vibrant colors, bringing these ancient stories to life for a Victorian audience. They saw in these myths a connection to a more beautiful and idealized past, a world of romance and adventure that contrasted with the grimy realities of industrial life. The Victorian engagement with mythology was not just about escapism; it was also about finding moral and ethical frameworks in these ancient stories, using them to reflect on the challenges and anxieties of their own time. They used the mythic figures to reflect the ideal of beauty, and the ideal of the human spirit.

Mythology in both these eras was a way to reflect on the human spirit, and to create a bridge between the past and the present. It was a way to understand the human condition, and to find meaning in a changing world. Modern literature has witnessed a surge in reinterpretations of classical myths, where authors are not just retelling ancient stories but reimagining them to reflect contemporary concerns and perspectives. This trend is driven by a desire to challenge traditional interpretations, to give voice to marginalized characters, and to explore the enduring relevance of these myths in a modern context.

Madeline Miller's novels, *Circe* and *The Song of Achilles*, also offer fresh perspectives on well-known mythological figures. Miller humanizes these characters and explores their inner lives and motivations. Her *Circe* is not just a witch; she is a complex and nuanced character, a woman who struggles with her identity and her place in the world. Her *Achilles* is not just a hero; he is a young man grappling with love, loss, and the inevitability of fate. Miller's reinterpretations challenge traditional interpretations of these myths and offer a more empathetic and humanizing portrayal of these ancient figures.

W.B. Yeats, one of the most famous poets of the 20th century, frequently used Greek myths in his poems. In his poem *Leda and the Swan*, Yeats uses the myth of Zeus, who transforms into a swan to seduce Leda, to explore the themes of power, violence, and fate. This myth is used to symbolize a moment of historical and personal transformation, reflecting the idea that moments of violence or force often lead to significant change. In *The Second Coming*, Yeats uses the myth of the coming of a new age to illustrate the uncertainty and violence he perceives in the world. The image of a "rough beast" coming to birth at the end of the world reflects the fear of change and the breakdown of the old order. Similarly, in his poem *The Tower*, Yeats uses the myth of the tower itself as a symbol of both wisdom and decay. The tower is a recurring image in Yeats' poetry, often representing his own search for meaning and a way to transcend the limitations of the physical world. In this way, Yeats shows how myths are not only about the past but also reflect the poet's inner struggles and aspirations.

Similarly, in Indian literature, the mythological character of Ravana from the *Ramayana* has been reinterpreted in novels like *Ravana: Enemy of Aryavarta* by Amish Tripathi, which presents Ravana as a multi-dimensional figure rather

than a mere villain. These reinterpretations of classical myths show how ancient stories continue to evolve and remain relevant in modern literature.

Mythological figures are more than just characters in stories. They symbolize deeper truths about the human condition. Figures like Arjuna, Prometheus, and Sita represent ideals such as heroism, defiance, and purity. In the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna's internal conflict on the battlefield reflects the universal human struggle between duty and personal desire. Similarly, in Greek mythology, Prometheus' defiance of the gods represents the tension between knowledge and punishment.

These mythological figures, whether heroes or villains, continue to inspire writers to explore themes of morality, identity, and human struggle. In modern literature, authors often draw upon these figures to ask questions about human nature, the consequences of choice, and the search for meaning in a complex world. The author of the present paper also incorporates mythology and cultural references in his novels which makes his writing both insightful and rich. His debut novel *Love's Not Time's Fool* is deeply rooted in Hindu mythology. In the opening of the novel, the novelist connects the story of Lord Krishna and the river to modern issues like pollution. He writes, "The Yamuna was once a serene river during the time of Lord Krishna, but today it is polluted due to waste from factories in Agra, affecting both humans and animals" (13). This connection between ancient myths and modern environmental concerns illustrates how the novelist uses mythology to highlight contemporary issues. Throughout the novel, characters like Richa Pandit are seen worshipping Lord Krishna, and rituals such as chanting the Gayatri Mantra and reading the Garud Puran are incorporated into the story. These religious practices show the novelist's respect for Hindu culture and its teachings, such as the idea of the soul being eternal, which he explores through the death rituals of Abhilash's mother.

In addition to Hindu beliefs, the novelist also brings in Christian mythology, referencing the Bible, particularly the story of Adam and Eve from Genesis. In one part of the novel, a character asks, "Do you believe in The story of Adam and Eve, the first man and woman created by God?". (20) The novelist also links this myth to modern gender issues, asking, "Do you blame women for human problems?". (p.21) Through this reference, he engages with philosophical debates on human nature and morality.

In *I.A.S Today*, the novelist again blends mythology with modern life. The story follows a young man, Romesh, who rises from humble beginnings to become an IAS officer. Through Romesh's character, the novelist makes a reference to the Trojan War and highlights how Helen's beauty led to a war between Troy and Sparta. Romesh reflects on the consequences of women's choices in history, even quoting Shakespeare's line, "Frailty! Thy name is woman." (41) He also draws upon the Indian epic Ramayana to explore themes of identity and purpose. For example, Romesh's thoughts on life's purpose echo the struggles of Sumitra, a character who contemplates her role in the royal family. In *Ashes and Fire*, another novel, Lord Buddha's teachings on life and death play a central role. The novel begins with a conversation between Buddha and his disciple Ananda, where Buddha advises that suffering in life comes from worldly desires, and that true peace comes from overcoming them.

The novel follows Suvidha, a woman who becomes independent after her husband's death and explores themes of spirituality, the importance of rituals after death, and the need for inner peace. Lord Shiva's festival of Shivratri is also featured, showing how Suvidha seeks peace for her husband's soul by performing traditional rituals, which reflects the novelist's respect for Hindu customs. Throughout *Ashes and Fire*, characters seek guidance from Hindu deities like Lord Shiva and Lord Krishna. Even in the face of adversity, they maintain faith in divine powers. For example, Suvidha's attempts to connect with the spiritual world through rituals after her husband's death illustrate the novelist's belief in the importance of maintaining one's faith in difficult times.

In the novel, *Hope Against Hope*, the novelist frequently references Hindu mythology, including teachings from the *Bhagavad Gita*, and quotes from other religious texts. The characters in *Hope Against Hope* exhibit deep faith in God and believe that their troubles will pass if they hold onto hope. The novelist uses this belief to show how faith and trust in God can provide solace during uncertain times, just as the character Jag Mohan believes that divine guidance will lead to better outcomes. Thus author's novels are filled with references to religious and cultural myths, which help explore the complex emotions and psychological struggles of his characters. While his novels are rooted in modernity, they also emphasise the importance of faith, hope, and cultural traditions, which give his

work a timeless and universal appeal. His characters may face contemporary issues but their solutions often lie in the rich cultural and spiritual traditions of their heritage.

In conclusion, Mythology has a profound impact on literature, providing timeless stories that explore fundamental aspects of human existence. Whether through divine interventions, heroism, or moral dilemmas, mythological narratives continue to resonate with readers and writers alike. From the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* to Greek and Roman myths, these ancient stories offer valuable insights into human nature and the challenges we face. Their reinterpretation in modern literature demonstrates their enduring relevance which bridges the gap between ancient wisdom and contemporary concerns.

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Renowned novelist Vikas Sharma has built an impressive body of work in just five years, with twelve novels to his credit. These include the Hindi novel *Raah Ke Patthar* and English titles such as *Love's Not Time's Fool*, *I.A.S. Today*, *Medicine: Light in Twilight*, *498A: Fears and Dreams*, *Hope Against Hope*, *Ashes and Fire*, *Ideas and Events*, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, *SANA*, *Media Revolution 2030*, *Love and Ego*, and his latest, *Honey Trap*. He currently serves as General Secretary of the Association for English Studies of India (AESI) and Professor of English at Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut (U.P.). With over sixty research papers, supervision of twenty-eight awarded Ph.D. theses, and eight ongoing, he exemplifies academic excellence. He also serves on

the editorial boards of three reputed journals. Sharma has authored six acclaimed books on literary criticism—*Treatment of History in Indian English Novels*, *Romantic Sensibility in the Prose Works, Essays and Journals of Emerson and Thoreau*, *Novel as an Art Form*, *Six Major Poets*, *Female Gaze in Bollywood*, and *Beyond the Rainbow: The Shades of Queer Love*—widely read by scholars. His works are part of undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, with eight Ph.D. theses already completed on his novels and over forty more in progress. Additionally, ten critical books have been published on his fiction.