



## Myths in Odia literary tradition: Relevance, resonance and reception

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### Abstract

Myth is a single story in mythology. Mythology is a system of hereditary stories of antiquity which was believed to be true to a particular cultural or religious group. In Christianity it was believed that Adam and Eve were the first man and woman respectively. These stories serve to explain the status quo of the universe and provide a rationale for some customs, rituals and establish rules by which people conduct their lives. Some myths are related to social rituals and are part of sacred ceremonies. If the protagonist of a myth is a human being rather than supernatural being the story becomes a legend. If the story concerns supernatural beings but not gods and the story is not a part of a systematic mythology, it is classified as a folktale. Myths help human beings to cope with the impossibility to prevent the reality and the course of events by way of scientific advances and rationality. So, myth is best understood not as a collection of fixed and final stories but an ever-changing process that is expressed in oral and written narratives and involves the diverse ways in which these narratives are received and appropriated. The paper explores different narratives of Odia folklores as they shape the Odia literary landscape when they were received in Odia literature from Odia tradition and culture. The paper also scrutinizes their present-day relevance in Odia literature and resonance in Indian Literature in a postcolonial/decolonized setup of Odia literary discourse.

**Keywords:** Myth, folklores, postcolonialism, tradition

### Introduction

In the wake of postcolonialism, as Priyambada Gopal is questioning the whiteness of syllabus and at the same time advocating decolonization of academia as an anticolonial agenda, the growth and stabilization of Indian literature vis-à-vis bhasa literature has been visible in non-western academia. As research on bhasa literature takes the centre stage, the elements that constitute and make it rich is being discussed and written about. Many cutting-edge journals, books, monographs, magazines carry out articles on various ancient classical traditions, cultures that enriched bhasa literature since time immemorial. One such antique custom was that of mythic folklore in Odia literature.

The myth and folklores that are part of ancient human life have remained due to their spontaneity, acceptability and universality. Myth gives identity to ritual and dream. It is the intersection of reality and imagination. According to Prafulla Mohanty:

“The poet’s contemporary ethos often is fortified by a metaphorical identity or demonized by contrastive symbolism with myths are used as frames or referential signposts. Allusions to myth provide a second language to work of art, and initiate another level of meaning and interpretation”. (Mohanty, 236)

In Indian literature the presence of myth is ubiquitous.

### Myth as Structure

As the structuralist critic Claude Levi-Strauss points out that the socio-cultural existence of human being is underlined and supported by a deep-seated social grammar. Myths are the languages which help humans or to primitive men to articulate various aspects of his existence by providing him the possibility helps him negotiate being in the world better. The underlying grammars that inform the myths also structures the world view of the human beings conceptualize their position and their role in the society. Roland Barthes uses myth to denote certain semiotic constructions of

ideological intent. He looked upon its naturalising functions. Northop Frye however talks about “...the social process of constructing and revitalizing myths.” (Mund, 61) Myth acts as a frame to give it meaning and direction.

### Myth as Continuity

Myth of a culture is not static. It flows like water from generation to generation. As it marches forward it keeps itself clean, pure and uncontaminated. It not only carries the culture but also modifies itself with transmission. Through ages it becomes a melting pot of religion, customs and ways of living. Thus, myth becomes immortal as it continues. To quote C.N. Srinath,

“The longer the history of a nation or people, the deeper the confluence of myth and history, each nourishing the other, their border merging one into the other. To creative writer, though contemporary reality is the only authentic field of his activity for its perception and imaginative apprehension, history and myth are great sources of creativity.” (145)

In case of India, myth has become a powerful instrument to preserve both past and present. History has a past but myth is omnipresent.

### Myths in West

In the literatures written in Europe the myths of Jupiter, Venus, Prometheus, Adam, Eve have been used by the poets and writers in their plots, episodes and themes. Myths in some cases are the products of poets’ own creativity. William Blake, the mythopoeic and prophetic poet of English literature has created myths of his own by fusing hereditary myths, Biblical stories and prophecies and his own intuition, creativity, vision and intellect. James Joyce in *Ulysses and Finnegans Wake*, T.S. Eliot in *Waste Land*, Eugene O’Neil in *Mourning Becomes Electra* the most celebrated writers of high modern period blend modern commonplace materials with ancient mythical patterns.

The scope of the paper is to give a synoptic overview of how Odia literature shows the incorporation and continuity of myth, which is not a recent phenomenon but has been done since its origin, not as a Western phenomenon but as a character embedded in its history. One can easily notice the collective consciousness, motifs in the canonical works of Odia literature written in different historical periods.

### Odia Mythologies in Literature

Myths take its origin from existing mythologies prevalent in India and every state has its own versions. The imaginative literature is intertextual in nature taking its root from literary tradition, myth, legend, history and folklore. Myth in itself contains history, tradition and legacy. Myth is a cyclical notion of history where both the elements are intertwined. It can be used a tool to reflect contemporary reality in literature. There is no clear break between past and present. According to N. Manu Chakrabarty,

“Myths and literary narratives, as is well known, carry socio-cultural experiences and values and are not mere imaginative productions of communities and individuals with no historical bearing or relevance. It is for this reason that myths- both from oral and the written traditions- and literary texts that extrapolate many dimensions from the myths will have to be understood as cultural and political statements, and in certain cases as intellectual and creative interrogations of the value systems of the societies and communities they deal with.” (177-178)

Myths and archetypes ignite creative energies. The way mythical elements are employed in artistic creations varies with time and individual psyche. However, myth and creative imagination go in tandem with each other.

A very popular myth is that of Kesaba Koili that depicts Yashoda's maternal bereavement of losing his foster son Krushna who had left Gopapura to reach Mathura. In the similar fashion Gangadhar Meher, interprets myth in his own style through individual perception of society in his works like *Tapaswini*, *Keechak Badh*, *Pranayballari* and *Indumati*. Madhusudan Rao has the similar expression in his poem Sita Banabas. However, the use of myth in Odia literature touched its height by Radhanath Roy- the writer mostly exposed to Western literature. His mythopoeic works where he creates myths, legends and archetypes of his own are: *Chilika*, *Usha*, *Chandrabhaga*, *Kedar Gouri*, *Nandikeshari*, *Parbati* and *Mahajatra*.

Like their Western counterparts most of the writers of 19<sup>th</sup> century taking cues from Purans, scriptures and hymns to create mythologies of their own. This mythopoesis gives a new lease of life to Odia literature. The writers of various schools like Satyabadi, Sabuja, and the Nationalist continued the tradition of myth making by revitalizing, reinterpreting the existing corpus of mythology.

After independence the influence of West became visible in Odia literature. Most high modern English writers were read, re-read and interpreted in the light of themes, motifs and techniques. Many Western theories sneaked into Odia literature like symbolism, imagism, impressionism, expressionism, Dadaism etc., which helped the modern Odia poets to create myths of their own. As poets authoritatively used myths in their works, the novelists were busy in using national consciousness, Gandhian politics, and national movements in their literary oeuvre. Nevertheless, they have also exploited the use of myth and archetypes in their novels to represent post-colonial condition. Gandhi has emerged as

a new archetype in the popular consciousness and have been properly employed in fiction.

However, Gopinath Mohanty the first Jnanapitha awarded Odia novelist succeeded in formulating myth of his own by drawing elements from the deities and rituals from ethnic tribes of Koraput in his works: *Paraja*, *Amrutara Santan* and *Dadi Budha*. Surendra Mohanty in Neela Shaila and Neeladribijay has made a powerful use of Jagannath archetype by skillfully assimilating history, legends, folklore and reality. The Jagannath archetype that was present in collective unconscious of Odia people got vivified by Surendra Mohanty in his novels. This attempt of restoring Jagannath myth has an epoch on Jagannath centric popular culture of Odisha. It is worth mentioning here that, Kanhu Charan Mohanty in his eponymous novel *Satyabati* borrowed the name Satyabati from Mahabharat. *Shakuntala* the path breaking contemporary novel of Shantanu Acharya is an interesting mixture of myth, folklore and realism.

The contributions of modern Odia writers like Guru Prasad Mohanty, Bhanuji Rao, Ramakant Rath, Sitakant Mohapatra and their successors like Soubhagya Kumar Mishra, Deepak Mishra, Rajendra Kishore Panda are unfathomable in giving their poetry a mythic dimension. Ramakant Rath the most influential contemporary poet has used the popular archetype of lovelorn Radha for Krushna in his magnum opus *Sri Radha*. Sitakant Mohapatra in his work *Astapadi* has exploited Odia mythical patterns and archetypes. Poets like Pratibha Satapathy in her *Sabari*, have successfully represented characters from mythologies. In Odia poetry the use of Lord Jagannath as a manifestation of Lord Vishnu is all pervasive. Sri Radha and Shabari rediscover the self through an intense experience of love for the lord. They have passionate infatuation for the god. Sri Radha makes a paradoxical awareness of the world of sorrow and desolation, the consciousness of death in the pangs of the bodily self. Both the texts are spiritual in orientation. The spirituality does not lead to final union with the beloved but it heralds a perpetual self-renewal. The love sees perennial rebirth from the dissolution of the self.

### Conclusion

Myth in poetry has both structural and representational element. It acts as a framework to study literature and culture. Some questions raised by myths may not be answered leading to linguistics crisis and inadequacy of human language. But myths play a role to articulate the complexity of the contemporary human predicament. To quote K Sachidanandan, “All myths seem to have an ontological gap between event and meaning. A myth intends to be an adequate symbolic representation by closing the gap; yet its meaning is perpetually open and universal only because once the absence of final meaning is recognized, the gap itself demands interpretation which in turn must go on and on, for language is nothing if it is not a system of open meaning”. (Sachidanandan, xi)

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