

MYTH AS HEGEMONIC CONSTRUCT

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Abstract: *The present paper attempts to reinvestigate the concept of myth with anthropological perspective, and, argues that myth plays a vital role in hegemonizing the masses through the strategies of cultural indoctrination. Myth, though an indispensable process in the history of human development, and, anthropologically speaking, is the idiosyncratic feature of human species, also serves as the powerful instrument of domination and the strategy of hegemony for the class/caste elites.*

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Projection of specific myths in literature, films, T. V. serials and other cultural texts needs to be red with anthropological and sociological perspective, because, myths make a certain kind of cultural impact on our day today life. In fact myths regulate and govern our life in a specific way as is envisioned by the ruling castes/classes though, many a time, we remain unaware of this hegemonic design of the dominant castes/classes. Basically myth is the unique articulation of human creativity which is, anthropologically speaking, an indispensable phenomenon in the history of human development that marks the distinctiveness of human species from animal species. Myths and legends have been playing a crucial role in various phases of human development, therefore, the phenomenon of myth creation should be understood in the light of evolutionary anthropological context with its cultural political connotations that have been shaping and reshaping our worldview. A literary text or a cultural text that revisions and reinterprets the age old myths must be perceived in its social context to which it belongs, represents, and whose worldview it upholds, then only a reader can reach to the political motives and undercurrents that seek to validate and legitimate the hegemonic power relations and structures. Dominant myths play a significant role in the process of acculturation and indoctrination that determines our worldview. This acculturation and indoctrination conditions our mind and becomes the perpetual aspect of unconscious. Our unconscious carries and contains innumerable myths and legends which we seldom question or try to seek its validity or authenticity. Moreover, we are not inclined to perceive its political connotations or its cultural consequences. Religious scriptures, dominant media, dominant cultural texts, mainstream literary tradition play the major role in the biggest political game of mythopoeia. The present paper tries to explore the germination of dominant socio-cultural traditions which have been validated and sanctioned by dominant mythology. Originally, mythopoeia is the pre-scientific revolution phenomenon, but it certainly accelerated human imagination in its journey in making the sense of the world. However, those primitive myths continued to be indispensable part of unconscious and served as major driving force and guiding principle that determined the way of life. Myth, in course of human development, acquired many dimensions and connotations with its intrinsic contradictions, conflicts and complexities. Claude Levi-Strauss observes:

Myths are still widely interpreted in conflicting ways: as collective dreams, as the outcome of a kind of esthetic play, or as the basis of ritual. Mythological figures are considered as personified abstractions, divinized heroes, or fallen gods. Whatever the hypothesis, the choice amounts to reducing mythology either to idle play or to a crude kind of philosophic speculation. (102)

Myths may be concerned with the personified abstractions or divinized heroes; and the hypothesis may

amount to reducing mythology to the idle play or crude philosophic speculations as Levi-Strauss says, but, it occupies a large portion of unconscious which is the determining factor of our personality. There may be multiple and conflicting ways of interpretation of myths, but we must accept the fact that those interpretations are generally accepted which come from the dominant class/caste. Dominant media, religion, literary tradition, and cultural practices project certain myths as paradigm and impose certain idealistic parameters on the masses and, in this way, operate and regulate their thought processes. For instance, the figure of Ram is the paradigm of the supreme human being (Purushottam), divinized hero in Straussian terminology; Laxman as the paradigm of the cooperative and committed brother, Hanuman as the paradigm of honest and devoted disciple while Ravan as the paradigm of evil. Of course, these mythological figures have been reinterpreted and deconstructed by many thinkers, researchers and literary persons; and, especially Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* has portrayed the myth of Ramayana in deconstructive manner which compels the reader to reconsider the epic. In fact Anand Neelakantan's attempt is a kind of rediscovering and re exploring the popular myths of Ram and Ravan from the alternative perspective. It is actually, demythologizing the hegemonic myths that have been resulting in a perpetual political enslavement of the masses. But, the persons who interrogate the dominant myths and try to establish the counter myths are, normally, not counted, though there may be rational, logical and scientific stuff in their arguments. Means, those myths obtain acceptance which are established by dominant class/caste, here, myth acquires the form of ideology, which governs, operates, and regulates power relations and power structure. To cite Marx, at this point, would be highly pertinent:

The ideas of ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. The individuals composing the ruling class possess among the other things consciousness, and therefore think. Insofar, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of epoch. (169)

Myth has, anthropologically speaking, played a very crucial role in human development and it was, in a way, a naïve attempt to understand the mysteries of the natural phenomena. Noted anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor attempts a pertinent definition of the concept of myth:

A story that recounts purportedly historical events to explain how traditions, major doctrines, religions, and similar nuclear concepts arose. The major protagonists in myth are deities. Myths probably were attempts on the part of early man to explain natural phenomena. The sun, the universe, the sky and the life after death are prolific sources of myth. An example of a functional myth is the American Indian notion that a fish buried in a hill of corn gave its spirit to the growing grain. By this myth, Indians could facilitate the process of growth although they did not understand it. (372-73)

Tylor, in his definition, focuses on the very character of the notion of myth as a narration of the emergence of religions and beliefs, doctrines etc. which is putatively historical. But the most important aspect of this definition, I believe, is, myth is an attempt by the archaic man to explain the natural phenomena which was beyond his intelligibility. Mythopoeia, therefore, is, seemingly a deliberate phenomenon, which was very much indispensable to survive and elevate him above the animal species. Therefore, we can see, in all the old civilizations of the world, myth play a vital role. A country with a long past has abundance of myths, or

in other words, without exuberance of the treasure of the myths, a country cannot have rich civilization and culture. The richness of a culture and the development of a civilization depend upon the exuberance of myths. Myths are ubiquitous in all the early civilizations, this is yet another aspect, and interestingly, the language of all the myths in all the civilizations in the world, is similar, that is- symbolic. Erich Fromm also tries to define the notion of myth in the similar tone of Tylor and pinpoints the linguistic analogy of the myths. He observes:

The myth like the dream, offers a story occurring in space and time, a story which expresses, in symbolic language, religious and philosophical ideas, experiences of the soul in which the real significance of the myth lies. If one fails to grasp the true meaning of myth, one finds oneself confronted with this alternative: either the myth is pre scientific, naïve picture of the world and of history and at best a product of poetically beautiful imagination, or- and this is the attitude of the orthodox believer- the manifest story of the myth is true, and one must believe it as a correct report of events which actually happened in “reality”. (122)

The myth, according to Fromm, is an expression of religious and philosophic ideas, and the mythic stories are true for the orthodox believer, which, in fact, are not true. Fromm's reading of the notion of myth must be taken seriously in order to understand the very phenomena of modern mythopoeia, because, it seems that the myths which are, as a matter of fact 'naïve picture of the world and history' are believed to be true. Once the myth is treated as truth, then, the process of politicization begins. Deliberate creation of myth and its glorification becomes the political agenda for the class/caste elites. Myths are not just glorified but validated and sanctioned also with the help of religion. It happens pervasively, especially when the process of institutionalization of religion takes place. Myth is projected as theoretical and philosophical framework for religious construct. This process is, of course, reciprocal- religion supports myths and myths corroborate the religion. Here myths become the instrument of exploitation in the hands of dominant class/caste. Directly or indirectly, myth operates on overt and covert levels and turns into an instrument of hegemony and, in multiple ways, captures the psyche of the masses. Hegemony, as Gramsci argues, is not just a coercive process, but an intriguing, strategic phenomenon of winning the consent of the dominated ones. He observes hegemony as:

The “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is “Historically” caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (191)

Basically, any sort of domination, physical, economic, geographic, social or cultural, is not possible, for a prolonged period, without capturing the psyche of the dominated ones. This capturing of psyche takes place by convincing the masses with the certain sort of illusory promises of happiness and eternal bliss, for which, the dominant class/caste adopts certain scholarly strategies to psychologically hegemonize the masses. When the masses are psychologically hegemonized, there remain the least possibilities of opposition and counter attack from the side of the masses, rather, the domination is spontaneously consented and enjoyed by the masses. In post modern times, in India, we can witness the innumerable common people listening to the sermons of various god-men. In fact, they enjoy a sort of psychological slavery in the name of religion which is validated by myths. Mobs are always irrational and can be driven and operated as per the whims of the god men. God-men provide a certain kind of illusory picture of life after death, heaven, and, economically exploit the naïve masses. People's belief in the religion, to a large extent, and their conditioned psyche, enable the god-men conveniently hegemonize the masses. Hegemony, as Gramsci argues, always results into economic exploitation of the masses and benefits the dominant class. Therefore it becomes necessary on the part of the oppressed masses to read the myths and the underlying hegemonic strategies with inquisitive mindset provided by anthropological and sociological perspective.

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