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Myths in Ancient and Contemporary Indian English Literature

Dr. Yogesh Ramdas Gangurde[1] Dr. Rajesh Dattatray Zankar[2]

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[1]Assistant Professor, Department of English, MVP Samaj's K.R.T. Arts, B. H. Commerce &A.M. Science (KTHM) College, Nashik, Maharashtra, INDIA
[2]Associate Professor, Department of English,MVP Samaj's Arts, Commerce & Science College, Nandgaon, Maharashtra, INDIA
Email: nand251125@gmail.com

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Address for correspondence:
Dr. Rajesh Dattatray Zankar
Associate Professor, Department of English,MVP Samaj's Arts, Commerce & Science College, Nandgaon, Maharashtra, INDIA
Email: nand251125@gmail.com

Abstract

Myths have always played a central role in shaping Indian thought, culture, and literary expression. From ancient Sanskrit epics and Puranic narratives to modern Indian English literature, myths continue to provide writers with powerful frameworks to explore human experience, moral conflict, social change, and cultural identity. This research article examines the presence and transformation of myths in ancient Indian literature and their reinterpretation in contemporary Indian English writing. The study explores how classical myths from texts such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas functioned as moral, philosophical, and cultural guides in early Indian society. It then analyzes how modern Indian English writers draw upon these mythic traditions to address present-day concerns such as gender roles, caste, identity, nationalism, and personal freedom. Rather than treating myths as fixed or sacred narratives, contemporary authors often revise, question, and humanize mythological figures, making them relevant to modern readers. Through a comparative literary approach, this article highlights continuity and change in the use of myth, showing how ancient narratives are reimagined to reflect contemporary realities. The study argues that myth in Indian English literature serves not only as a link to cultural heritage but also as a creative tool for critique, reinterpretation, and renewal. By examining selected ancient texts and modern literary works, this article demonstrates that myth remains a living literary force that adapts to changing historical and social contexts while retaining its symbolic depth and emotional power.

Keywords: *Indian mythology, ancient Indian literature, contemporary Indian English literature, myth and modernity, epic reinterpretation, cultural identity, feminist retellings, literary adaptation*

Introduction

Myth is one of the oldest forms of storytelling known to human civilization. In India, myths are deeply woven into religious practice, social customs, ethical values, and artistic expression. Ancient Indian literature is rich with mythological narratives that explain the origins of the universe, the nature of good and evil, and the duties of individuals within society. These myths were not simply stories for entertainment. They were ways of understanding life, morality, and the human relationship with the divine.

Indian English literature, which developed more prominently during the colonial and postcolonial periods, has inherited this vast mythic tradition. However, modern writers engage with myth in very different ways. While ancient texts often presented myths as sacred truths, contemporary authors approach them as flexible narratives open to reinterpretation. This shift reflects changing social realities, literary sensibilities, and critical perspectives.

This article explores how myths function in both ancient Indian literature and contemporary Indian English literature. It examines how mythological narratives have moved from collective cultural instruction to individual artistic expression. By tracing this journey, the study aims to show how myths continue to shape Indian literary imagination across centuries.

Understanding Myth in the Indian Context

In the Indian tradition, myth is closely connected with religion, philosophy, and daily life. Myths are found in sacred texts, oral storytelling, rituals, festivals, and performing arts. They provide symbolic explanations for natural phenomena, social structures, and moral dilemmas. Unlike purely fictional stories, Indian myths often blend history, belief, and imagination.Texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas form the foundation of Indian mythological literature. These works present a complex moral universe where gods, humans, demons, and animals interact. The stories emphasize values such as duty, loyalty, sacrifice, compassion, and justice. At the same time, they acknowledge human weakness, moral ambiguity, and suffering. Myth in India has never been static. Different regions, languages, and communities have produced their own versions of common stories. This tradition of retelling and reinterpretation makes myth a living cultural form rather than a closed system.

This quality becomes especially important in modern literary adaptations.

Myths in Ancient Indian Literature

Ancient Indian literature uses myth as a primary mode of expression. The Ramayana and Mahabharata are not only epic narratives but also ethical texts that explore the complexities of human behavior. Characters such as Rama, Sita, Arjuna, Draupadi, and Krishna represent ideals, conflicts, and moral questions that continue to resonate.

The Ramayana presents Rama as the embodiment of duty and righteousness. His actions are often interpreted as models for ideal conduct, especially in terms of kingship, family loyalty, and personal sacrifice. Sita's character raises important questions about virtue, suffering, and social expectations placed on women. These themes made the epic deeply influential in shaping social values.

The Mahabharata offers a more complex and realistic portrayal of moral conflict. It does not present clear distinctions between good and evil. Instead, it explores ethical dilemmas through flawed characters and tragic outcomes. The Bhagavad Gita, embedded within the epic, addresses philosophical questions about duty, action, and detachment. Ancient myths, therefore, functioned as tools for moral reflection rather than simple moral instruction.

The Puranas further expanded mythological narratives by focusing on cosmology, genealogy, and devotion. Stories of Vishnu's avatars, Shiva's transformations, and the power of the goddess shaped religious imagination and cultural identity. These myths reinforced the idea that the divine is deeply involved in human affairs.

Transition from Ancient to Modern Literary Use of Myth

With the arrival of colonial education and the English language, Indian literature underwent significant changes. Western literary forms such as the novel, short story, and modern drama became prominent. At the same time, Indian writers faced the challenge of expressing indigenous experiences in a foreign language.

Myth provided a natural bridge between tradition and modernity. Early Indian English writers used myth to assert cultural identity and resist colonial dominance. Myths helped preserve a connection to Indian heritage while experimenting with new literary forms. Over time, writers began to use myth not just for cultural affirmation but also for questioning tradition and social norms.

This shift marks a move from reverence to reinterpretation. Myths were no longer treated as unquestionable truths but as narratives open to analysis, critique, and creative transformation.

Myth in Contemporary Indian English Literature

Contemporary Indian English writers engage with myth in diverse and innovative ways. Rather than retelling epics in a traditional manner, they focus on marginalized voices, alternative perspectives, and psychological depth. Myth becomes a means to explore modern issues such as identity, gender inequality, caste discrimination, and political power.

R. K. Narayan's novels subtly incorporate mythic elements into everyday life, blending the sacred with the ordinary. His fictional town of Malgudi reflects a world where myth and modern reality coexist naturally. Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* draws heavily on Indian philosophical myths to explore spiritual identity and cultural conflict.

More recent writers openly revise mythological narratives. Writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reinterpret epic stories from female perspectives, giving voice to characters who were traditionally silent. Such retellings challenge patriarchal readings of myth and highlight emotional and psychological complexity.

Amitav Ghosh uses myth alongside history and ecology to explore cultural memory and environmental concerns. His engagement with myth is subtle and layered, connecting ancient beliefs with contemporary global issues. In these works, myth becomes a lens through which the past speaks to the present.

Feminist Reinterpretations of Myth

One of the most significant developments in contemporary Indian English literature is the feminist reworking of myth. Female characters from ancient epics are reexamined as individuals with agency, desire, and inner conflict. Writers question traditional portrayals of obedience and sacrifice.

By retelling stories from the perspectives of characters such as Sita, Draupadi, and Kunti, modern authors expose the gender biases embedded in classical narratives. These reinterpretations do not reject myth altogether. Instead, they expand its meaning by making it more inclusive and human.

Such works show that myth can evolve with changing social values. They demonstrate how ancient stories can be used to address modern concerns without losing their cultural significance.

Myth as a Tool for Social and Cultural Critique

In contemporary Indian English literature, myth often serves as a subtle tool for critique. Writers use familiar mythological frameworks to comment on political power, social injustice, and moral hypocrisy. Because myths are widely recognized, their reinterpretation creates strong emotional and intellectual impact.

By placing mythic structures within modern settings, authors reveal parallels between ancient conflicts and present realities. This technique allows writers to address sensitive issues without direct confrontation. Myth thus becomes a shared cultural language through which complex ideas can be communicated effectively.

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Continuity and Change in Mythic Tradition

Despite changes in form and perspective, there is a strong continuity in the use of myth across Indian literature. Ancient and contemporary works both rely on myth for symbolic depth and emotional resonance. The difference lies in intention and interpretation.

Ancient literature used myth to uphold social and cosmic order. Contemporary literature uses myth to question, revise, and reimagine that order. This shift reflects broader changes in Indian society, including increased emphasis on individual experience and critical inquiry.

Conclusion

Myths remain a vital force in Indian English literature, connecting ancient traditions with modern sensibilities. From sacred narratives that guided early society to contemporary reinterpretations that question inherited values, myths continue to shape literary expression in powerful ways.

This study shows that myth is not a relic of the past but a flexible and enduring narrative form. By engaging with myth, Indian English writers preserve cultural memory while addressing contemporary concerns. The ongoing dialogue between ancient and modern uses of myth enriches Indian literature and ensures its relevance in a changing world.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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