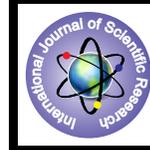


The presence of myths in literature



Literature

KEYWORDS : myth, literature, man, nature, structure.

Dr. Siba Barkataki

ABSTRACT

Myths are powerful symbolic stories that help man to understand his universe. These myths are largely embedded in literature owing to the highly imaginative and interrogative nature of mythical narratives. Myths can be interpreted in multiple ways and their presence in literary texts varies according to the genre of text. This article focuses on factors that enable the existence of mythical figures in literature. It will highlight the literary tools deployed by the author to enable the incorporation of mythical paradigms in the body of the text. It will also analyze the changes that occur in the text due to the introduction of myths and the manner in which the author modifies his narratives to enable the reader to identify with the stories so that the myth attains its full potential.

Myths have existed ever since man learnt the art of telling stories. Myths can be defined as fundamental stories that highlight the man's relationship with nature, society and religion and helps in articulating experiences that cannot be explained. It is owing to their revelatory quality that Kenneth Burke defines myths as "powerfully imaginative stories"; stories that put into words the otherwise inexpressible thoughts, feelings and experiences. Thus, the role of language in the creation and sustenance of myths cannot be ignored. In his book *Mythologies* Roland Barthes brings to light the linguistic dimension of myths: "Myth is a type of speech [...] It is a message. It is not an object, a concept or an idea but a mode of signification, a form" (Barthes, 1957, p.215). It is this linguistic aspect that makes the existence of myths inevitable in literature. Since time immemorial authors have used myths in multiple ways: as aesthetic models to stories, as points of reference and allusion, as metaphors and allegories and so on. A mythical story can be told and retold, by means of original creative expressions. This article focuses on factors that enable the existence of mythical figures in literature and how the presence of myths modifies the body of the literary text. As point of reference, this study analyzes the works of Swiss author C.F Ramuz, applauded by his critics as the "creator of myths".

Owing to their association with man and his understanding of the cosmos, myths can be defined in more ways than one. Historian and philosopher Mircea Eliade, brings to light this rich and diverse nature of myths by stating that: "Myth is an extremely complex cultural reality which can be approached and interpreted from various and complementary viewpoints" (Eliade, 1963, p.45). The present study endeavors to determine a specific definition of myth that will help to fully explore the aesthetic potential of Ramuz's novels and discover the creative goals of the author. Dictionaries define myth as a traditional story explaining natural or social phenomenon that involves supernatural beings or events. The fantastical nature of myths however does not disqualify them from being used in realist novels. The myths are modified by the process of elimination of the supernatural dimension. Literary critic Northrop Frye calls this method of adaptation of myths to the literary genre as "displacement". This method ensures that the degree of visibility of the mythical figures vary depending on the genre of the novel. A myth that is not displaced undergoes maximum stylization by retaining supernatural elements. Considering the narrative modes articulated by Aristotle we can determine the degree of displacement undergone by the myth. In the mythical mode, where gods, demi-gods and demons inhabit the story, the myth exists as it is and undergoes no displacement. In the romantic mode, the hero is superior to all the other characters but not to his physical environment. Although identified as a human, the figure of the hero is mythical owing to his exemplary actions, authority and powers of expression. In the realist mode, the myth undergoes maximum degree of displacement. The hero is an ordinary man whose physical and intellectual capacities are either the same or lesser than the other characters. In realist novels, mythical struc-

tures and archetypes are intimately woven into the regular and ordinary struggles of human life.

Ramuz's works are categorized as realist novels. Myths therefore undergo maximum displacement. Through the figure of the "farmer" Ramuz explores the attachment of man to society and to nature. The ordinary Swiss farmer and his hardships are glorified in such a way that it attains mythical proportions, in much the same way as Marxism mythifies the figure of the "worker". Using ordinary people these authors tell powerful symbolic stories, which inspire and motivate, while staying true to their realities. The farmer becomes a mythical figure in Ramuz's novels due to his attachment with nature. The farmers' experiences with nature belong to the universal cognitive baggage of humanity. Every reader recognizes his hardships and gets inspired, thus making the farmer a universal figure that transcends all geographical, social and religious barriers to reach the common man.

Using the farmer as the starting point Ramuz evokes various universal themes such as love, old age, idleness, death and so on. Furthermore, due to the predominance of nature the author is able to evoke two principal mythical paradigms i.e., the myth of creation and the myth of regeneration. These paradigms not only give a cyclical structure to his novels but also spell out the importance of nature in man's life, thus sanctifying the relationship between man and nature. Mircea Eliade points out the mythical nature of this relationship by stating that man's relationship with nature has always been a spiritual one that involves prayers, rituals and sacrifices. By renewing his ties with nature, man tends to rediscover the "sacred" (Eliade, 1957, p. 13). In his book *Das Heilige*, Rudolf Otto talks about the feeling of fear and awe in front of the sacred that defines a religious experience. A certain aspect of this religiosity can be found in Ramuz's novels. Man is completely stripped off his modernity. The reader finds oneself in an archaic world, where man directly confronts the enormous and arduous alpine nature for his survival. Expressions such as: paradise lost, going back to the origins of man, leading an elementary life etc, perfectly defines the position of man in his novels. The following words from one of his novels give an impression of how a reader is transported to a mythical world, awestruck and defenseless in front of the mountains rendered sacred by their enormity: "The abyss, the perfection of the void; where life ceases to exist, it is as if one finds oneself in the beginning of the world or maybe at the end of time. And a certain anxiety inhabits you" (Ramuz, 1996, p. 24).

Apart from the universal nature of stories, another important aspect that renders mythical a work of art is timelessness or the suspension of time. Eliade talks about the "eternal present" in which lived the primitive man (Eliade, 1949, p.86). By invoking the sacred into his reality, man extracts himself from the throes of time and lives in timelessness. A similar condition is created by Ramuz through his choice of poetic elements, backdrop and

characters. Firstly, the farmer is an eternal figure known to man since the beginning of humanity. Secondly, the alpine nature instills a sentiment of awe and gives a cyclic structure to the stories. Ramuz never sets his stories in historical time. There is no mention of dates, years or time. It is thus impossible to situate his characters in a particular time frame. He speaks of the regeneration of nature according to the cycle of seasons and the lives of his characters follow the same natural pattern. His stories are centered on events that involve nature: mounting of the Alps during spring, natural disasters that adversely affect the lives of farmers, struggles of life in the village and so on. The discovery of the self is attained by adhering to the cult of nature. Laurence Coupe defines this mythical method as the overlapping of ecology and mythology that enables to "re-imagine the earth, and so to recover the sense of its sacredness".

One can identify the influence of Greek authors such as Hesoid and Aeschylus in the union between man and nature. Ramuz's mythical mode can be identified in the manner in which this relationship transcends to universal dimensions. Man's submission to an all powerful nature also brings to mind instances of classical tragedies that are based on Greek mythologies. Ramuz's predilection for Greek authors and the Greek mythology is evident in his works.

Thus the two poetic archetypes – farmer and nature – form the backbone of Ramuz's myth creation. Belonging to the real world and thus to the realist mode, these two elements ensure that myths undergo maximum displacement. One can witness the union of two mythical paradigms: the myth of creation, that takes one back to an archaic world and the myth of regeneration that signifies the fertility of nature and the continuity of life.

By invoking an elementary world while talking of the continuity of life, the author tries to include chaos and cosmos in the singular space of the novel. The juxtaposition of chaos and cosmos defines the essence of human life. Thus, metaphorically Ramuz endeavors to bring his aesthetic world as close as possible to the real ordinary world and its problems. Charles-Albert Cingria rightly captures the spirit of Ramuz's novels: "the farmer is an elementary being, who can help us understand a few things about humanity and about human life". The self-exploratory and introspective aspects of his novels highlight the presence and functioning of myths. They incite the reader to reevaluate one's actions and thoughts and re-imagine a new world where man renews his ties with nature. The following world rightly define the role of myths in Ramuz's novels: "the work of myth is to explain, to reconcile, to guide action or to legitimate. We can add that myth-making is evidently a primal and universal function of the human mind as it seeks a more-or-less unified vision of the cosmic order, the social order, and the meaning of the individual's life". (Coupe, 2007, p.5)

The mythical figures in Ramuz's novels aim to renegotiate man's relationship with nature. It also helps man to rediscover the grandeur and beauty of ordinary human life when it is close to nature. It is thus evident that myths attain their full potential even in a realist framework. Although the fantastical stylization is discarded, the fundamental function of myths i.e., rearticulating the in-expressible remains intact. By reinstating the sacred link between man and nature, Ramuz provides a logical model by which to understand the human condition. The mythical consciousness renders intelligible the absurdity of human life.

REFERENCE

- Barthes, R (1957). *Mythologies*, Paris: Seuil. | Coupe, L (2007). *Myth*, New York : Routledge. | Eliade, M (1949). *Le mythe de l'éternel retour*, Paris : Gallimard. | Eliade, M (1957). *Mythes, rêves et mystères*, Paris : Gallimard. | Eliade, M (1963). *Myth and Reality*, New York : Harper & Row. |