

A BRIEF SURVEY OF APPROACHES TO MYTH WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO E.B.TYLOR

Mahesh M. Nivargi

Associate Professor

PG Department & Research Centre (English)

Mahatma Gandhi Mahavidyalaya

Ahmedpur-413515, Maharashtra

The activity of storytelling is possibly as old as language itself. Today's world has numerous stories handed down to us by our ancestors. Some of these stories have a special status—they are sacred stories and hence they are to be believed in. These are classified as 'myths'. Though myth is first and foremost a story and thus belonging to the field of literature, it is curious that its studies have been carried out mostly by scholars coming from other disciplines—mainly from Anthropology and Psychology. The present discussion is a brief survey of some major theories of myth developed by Anthropologists and Psychologists with a special reference to the relevance of contribution by one of the earliest scholars in the field, E.B.Tylor.

E. B. Tylor, the first professor of Anthropology in the English speaking world, is considered to be the father of Anthropology. He systematized the discipline of Anthropology by developing the theory of progressive relationship between primitive and modern cultures. He was the first scholar to adopt the modern statistical cross-cultural approach to the study of culture. Tylor's views about myth are comprehensively expressed in his major work titled *Primitive Culture* (1871). This study mainly establishes that primitive man was an early philosopher trying to use his reason for the explanation of natural events and events in the human life. This effort gave rise to Animism, the earliest form of religious belief. Anima, the Latin word for soul, is the root of this term Animism that describes the belief that souls occupy all physical entities. The souls in all physical entities other than human beings are regarded as Gods whereas human beings are regarded to be separate from Gods.

Tylor was certainly not the first scholar in his attempt at the study of myth. The study of myth dates back to classical period. Euhemerus, the 4th century B.C.E. Greek mythographer, made a scholarly effort to interpret myths by treating them as a reflection of historical incidents. This method came to be known as Euhemerism, the historical interpretation of myth based upon the theory that myths are distorted accounts of true historical incidents. Even before Euhemerus, Greek writers like Xenophanes, Herodotus, Hecataeus of Abdera and Ephorus had attempted to rationalize myth by this same method. Plato's *Phaedrus* contains a conversation where Socrates is shown to be giving a euhemeristic interpretation of the myth of Boreas and Orityia. The 4th century Roman writer Sallustius in his work *On the Gods and the World*, sought to defend the classical myths of Greek religion against the onslaught of Christian theology by stating that the myths represented the Gods themselves and the goodness of the gods. He tried to establish how the Greek myths contained a hidden truth, the divine essence. Sallustius also classified the myths in five categories: theological, physical, psychic, material, and a mixture of the psychic and the material. These pre-modern studies of myth were to be radically opposed in the modern period, especially the 19th century, when the modern theories of myth started appearing. Prior to Tylor,

the 18th century Italian scholar Giambattista had already probed into the role of human creative imagination in the formation of distinct myths at successive cultural stages. It was a period preceded by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The advent of scientific inventions in various fields had changed the world view of human beings drastically. Tylor, along with Herbert Spencer, Friedrich Max Muller, and James Frazer represented the intellectualists who gave utmost importance to the scientific spirit of inquiry. Tylor discusses myth in relation to the general ethnological problem of the development of civilization-“ The general thesis maintained is that Myth arose in the savage condition prevalent in remote ages among the whole human race, that it remains comparatively unchanged among the modern rude tribes who have departed least from these primitive conditions...”(Tylor283-284). Surveying myths of various kinds, Tylor attempts to trace their origin. For example, regarding the nature myths, he concludes that human beings observed the natural phenomena and attributed personal action to them in these myths. In all kinds of mythic conceptions, Tylor finds one main principle of evident suggestion and analogy of nature. Analogy is of prime importance to Tylor. He goes back to the origin of language itself in order to trace the beginning of myth in the mind of the myth-maker-“Deep as language lies in our mental life, the direct comparison of object with object and action with action lies yet deeper. The myth-maker’s mind shows forth even among the deaf-and-dumb, who work out just such analogies of nature as their wordless thoughts”(Tylor 298). Tylor shows Mythology to be resting on the basis of real and sensible analogy. The formation of language itself is fashioned by the human habit of resorting to analogies.

Thus “...the distinction of grammatical gender is a process intimately connected with the formation of myths”(Tylor 301).Tylor establishes this by citing the instance of the distinction made in every language between the strong and the weak, stern and gentle, rough and delicate, by contrasting these as male and female. In this way Tylor gives us two originating causes of myths: the primeval philosophy ascribing personal life to nature at large, and the tendency of explaining things through analogy that is deeply ingrained in the human mind. This view also differs from Max Muller’s view that all mythology was based on allegories of nature. Max Muller, who was perhaps equally responsible in the initiation of scholarly interest in comparative mythology, called myth as “the disease of language” (Max Muller 11), and proposed that myths explained the natural phenomena by personifying the natural forces. This personification was later forgotten by the society and the belief in the supernatural deities was established. Tylor often refers to Max Muller’s works but presents an essentially different view by reading myth literally and not allegorically or metaphorically. His view underlines that human beings actually understood the happenings in the animistic way as described in the myths. Myths are therefore not the allegories but actual reflections of how the world has been perceived.

Tylor’s study of myth places myth in the realm of primitive religion and therefore pits it against modern science but myth seems to be carrying out some of the functions of science nevertheless. For example, Tylor shows how the theories of relation between man and the lower mammalia are evident in the myths of almost all the culture groups around the world. The instances cited by Tylor include Central American mythology in which monkeys are mentioned to be once belonging to the human race; South-East African belief that the apes were anciently men and women (therefore called as the ‘first people’ in that language); the Zulu tale of a race of idle people who became baboons because they did not want to work but wanted to eat at other people’s houses. Still Tylor is firm in maintaining that accounts like these can in no way indicate a relation to science.

Tylor has carefully classified the myths from almost all parts of the world into various categories like Philosophical Myths, Geological Myths, Myths of Error, Perversion and Exaggeration, Etymological Myths, Eponymic Myths and Pragmatic Myths. The method of inquiry and analysis is systematic and scientific. Tylor's investigation results into two principles of mythological science. The first principle, treating myth as an organic product of mankind at large, reveals some essential qualities of human mind evident through the study of diverse myths. Tylor subordinates the individual, national and racial distinctions here. The second principle concerns the relation between myth and history. Rejecting the possibility that myths may represent real incidents from history, Tylor points out that myths rather reveal the arts and manners, the philosophy and religion of the respective societies. Thus "Myth is the history of its authors, not of its subjects; it records the lives, not of superhuman heroes, but of poetic nations"(Tylor 416).

Tylor's theory inspired a host of Anthropologists, Philosophers, Historians, Psychologists as well as Literary Critics to inquire further into the origin, nature and function of myths. Andrew Lang and James Frazer were his two contemporaries who were directly influenced by his work. Lang's principal work *Myth, Ritual, and Religion* (1887) has the aim of explaining the irrational element contained in myth. Lang chooses to differ from Tylor in considering myth as an element of religion. According to him "the religious conception uprises from the human intellect in one mood, that of earnest contemplation and submission: while the mythical ideas uprise from another mood, that of playful and erratic fancy"(Lang 21). Lang attempted to prove that myths contain many irrational elements because they were evolved in a time when human mind was in a condition quite unlike the present civilized condition. It was a condition when the things that appear to us today as unnatural and devoid of reason, seemed natural and rational to the savage person. Lang's theory is that the senseless element in mythology is a legacy from the fancy of ancestors who existed in a lower intellectual state. James Frazer in his monumental work *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890), compiles myths and customs from numerous societies much in the fashion that Tylor did in his texts and proposes three universal stages of human civilization: the initial stage of belief in magic, the second stage of organized religion and the third modern stage of faith in the powers of science. Developing Tylor's theory of myth, Frazer emphasized its essential relation to ritual and claimed that myth has its origin in ritual practices that are an integral part of the process of religious evolution. Myths, as per his theory, were intended to explain the ritual practices. For example the myths of the 'dying gods' Adonis, Attis and Osiris explained the reason behind the practice of castration by the priests of Attis' cult. One of the significant theses proposed by Frazer is that all myths are basically related to the idea of fertility in nature as they all contain the recurring motif of birth, death and resurrection of vegetation.

Frazer's attempts to identify the basic story motifs to which all human beings respond were continued by other scholars in the 20th century. The inquiry into myth by the Psychoanalysts was a natural development of the scholarly process started by the Anthropologists. Whereas the Anthropologists saw myth mainly as a part of religion and culture, the Psychologists studied them as the expressions of needs in the human psyche. Foremost among these was C. G. Jung who reached deeper into the human psyche to locate the impact of myth. Jung initially cooperated with Sigmund Freud who had his own radical explanations about the significance of myth in the human affairs. Through the analysis of Oedipal myth in his *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) Freud specified how myth gives vent to the

repressed longings and fears. He further compared taboo beliefs with neurosis and found common psychological roots for both in his *Totem and Taboo* (1912), and pointed out the similarities between the individual neurotic stages and the stages of human civilization in his *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). Today Jung's theories have a far reaching influence and wider acceptance than those of Freud. While Freud sought to use psychoanalysis for the ultimate explanation of myth, Jung used myth itself as a key to the realm of the unconscious. His ideas regarding myth are mostly scattered in passages all over his prolific writings like *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1934), *Psychology and Religion: West and East* (1938), *Analytical Psychology: Its Theory and Practice* (1968) rather than organized in a single work.

Jung proposes the existence of “collective unconscious”, a domain beyond what was identified by Freud as the personal unconscious and states that the subject matter for myth comes from this realm. The collective unconscious is inherited by the individual and along with the individual unconscious it is a kind of second psychic system that has collective, universal and impersonal nature. He sees whole mythology as a projection from this collective unconscious. Myth is identified as a way through which the collective unconscious strives to become conscious. An instance of Jungian analysis of myth can be seen in his collaborative work with Karl Kerényi *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (1973) where he presents a psychological analysis of two widely found myths- the Divine Child, and the Maiden, and identifies certain dream patterns common to everyone. These patterns are defined as “Archetypes”, the theory of which is regarded to be a major contribution by Jung. The archetypes are recurring patterns of thought and action evident universally across all culture groups. A product of development through centuries since antiquity, Jung identifies these to be the archaic images originating from the collective unconscious. The important function of the archetypes is to enable people to react properly to various situations that arise during life. This function has been the same through the ages. Jung stands in exact opposition to Tylor regarding the interpretation of myth. He holds the view that myths are encrypted symbolically and their meaning is not literal; however we always fall short of deciphering the complete meaning of these symbols because language itself consists of imperfect and inadequate symbols.

The Jungian thought attracted many eminent scholars and thus a method of interpretation entirely different from that proposed by Tylor started on its way to canonification in the 20th century. Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell have been the most prominent figures in this system of thought. Eliade through his works such as *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959), *Myths Dreams and Mysteries* (1960) and most significantly through the text *Myth and Reality* (1963) gave emphasis on understanding myth as it was perceived in archaic societies. In archaic societies myth “ means a ‘true story’ and beyond that, a story that is a most precious possession because it is sacred, exemplary, significant.” (Eliade 3). Eliade pointed out how myth supplies models for human behavior and, by that very fact, gives value and meaning to life. Joseph Campbell, through his most widely received study *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) demonstrated how mythical heroes from diverse culture groups share similar features and journey through the rites of passage to final transfiguration. This concept, described as the monomyth , is further elaborated with instances from the mythologies across the world in Campbell's four volume work *The Masks of God* (1962-68), in which four functions of myth , namely metaphysical, cosmological, sociological, and pedagogical, are also identified. Developing the Jungian approach of symbolic interpretation it is asserted in this text that “

Mythological symbols touch and exhilarate centers of life beyond the reach of vocabularies of reason and coercion.” (Campbell 4).

The study of myth acquired a new approach called as ‘Structuralism’ with the appearance of works by Claude Levi Strauss. Levi Strauss began by identifying the role of unconscious structures in ordering kinship systems in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), established structuralism as an influential method through the publication of *Structural Anthropology* (1958), *Totemism* (1962), and *The Savage Mind* (1962) and came to focus on the structure and essence of savage mythology in his four volume *Mythologique* (1964-1971). Levi Strauss examines thought categories embedded in myth to show how elementary social contradictions or problems are embodied in the structure of myth. These contradictions are encoded in myths because they cannot be resolved by the society. This code is visible in the pair of opposites contained in the myths such as nature/culture, raw/cooked, sky gods/earth gods. The function of myth is to mediate between these opposites and to make them acceptable. By applying the principle of binary opposition Levi Strauss consciously tries to bridge the gap between myth and science. In his *Myth and Meaning* (1978) he notes that “science, which had a purely quantitative outlook in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, is beginning to integrate the qualitative aspects of reality as well. This undoubtedly will enable us to understand a great many things present in mythological thinking which we were in the past prone to dismiss as meaningless and absurd.” (18-19).

Though the theories of myth developed significantly in various directions in the period since Tylor, Tylor’s propositions did not become obsolete. These have been endorsed most prominently by Neo-Tylorians David Bidney and Robin Horton in their texts *Theoretical Anthropology* (1967) and *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West* (1993) respectively to carry out the inquiry further in their own ways. Bidney regards the element of ‘belief’ to be of prime importance in the consideration of myth because “What we may regard as “myths” are, psychologically, charters of belief or sacred traditions for those who accept them and live by them” (Bidney 22-23). Distinguishing myth from superstition Bidney clarifies that myth involves a belief of special kind which indicates the idea of credible impossibility, while superstition is a mode of fear based on some irrational belief. Bidney also distinguishes myth from folk tales but notes that a given tale may be classed as myth at one time and as folk tale at another, depending upon the credence attached to it by the given society. Continuing this argument further, Bidney shows that myths can become folk tales in the process of time. These may “...then be refashioned into great literature having lasting symbolic value for subsequent generations eg. Goethe’s *Faust*, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and Melville’s *Moby Dick*.” (Bidney 22). Bidney’s relevance here should be noted because he relates myth to modern literature. Tylor proposed that animistic thinking was at the base of mythic creation. Taking Tylor’s concept of animism further, contemporary Anthropologist Robin Horton holds that the animistic way of thinking should not be regarded as an outmoded way. It should be possible to respect the intelligence of people who think animistically. Here, Horton underlines the literal meaning of myth and points out that the natural, supernatural, and social explanations of different phenomena in the human world are not mutually exclusive because most humans employ these three modes of explanation simultaneously.

It can be seen from the survey so far that myths have been mainly approached in two ways-literally and symbolically. Though Tylor’s theory favoured the literal reading of myth it also prompted others to formulate their own theories. A number of theories started from the point

of Tylor's argument, developed it further in independent directions, while many theories came to take a stance directly opposite to Tylor's propositions. In all the instances, however, one cannot but recognize the significance of the propositions put forth by Tylor. The legacy of Tylorian thought thus continues into the contemporary times.

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