

Concept of Myth in Anita Nair's novel The Better Man

Vaibhav Prabhakar Padole

Dr. Kapil R. Singhel

Abstract:

The most common definition of myth is an ancient, mystical, or mythical story. Today, myth is regarded as a work of fiction. We would dismiss the accounts of Gods assisting humans, spirits murdering people, and demon events if we come across them; by referring to them as a myth. Since we live in the era of science and reason, a myth could be based on a historical event. The human mind, on the other hand, was unable to comprehend the situation and misconstrued it as a mystical or paranormal incident. This occurrence was forgotten in later years, and the story that emerged became a myth. This article investigates how myth is used in Anita Nair's novel The Better Man. The first section of the paper will attempt to decipher the meaning of myth. The researcher will look at how various components of it are utilized in the novel The Better Man in the second part. Conclusions will be provided in the final and closing section based on the prior sections' discussions.

Keywords : Myth, Gandharva, Odiyan, Anita Nair, The Better Man etc.

Introduction:

Numerous writers have employed the concept of myth in their works, not just in English as well as in other languages. They've focused on different facets of myth, such as how Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka employs myth in his plays Death and the King's Horseman and A Dance of the Forest. In these two plays, Soyinka

used myth to study a phenomenon, based on the belief that the dead are never truly dead and always come into contact with live beings. For example, we may notice a preoccupation with scenarios in which Gods are central roles in both plays. Mythic aspects such as the function of the gods and the value of the ancestors can be observed in Whole Soyinka's matchmaking.

When it comes to western literature, W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot have both utilized myth. W.B. Yeats revived Irish mythology and folk etymology in his poems and dramas as an Irish nationalist. Church theology and the British-controlled school system have suppressed Irish myth and folklore. He re-educated the Irishman on their history and cultivated Irish nationalism. The Waste Land, a modernist poem by T.S. Eliot, is a mythic treasure trove. He mentions the Tiresias tale throughout the poem, while the poem's epigraph includes the Sybil myth. The poem focuses on the Fisher King myth. Notable myth writers in Indian literature include Girish Karnad, Devdutta Patnaik, and Ashvin Sanghi. These writers have based their plots on a certain myth in their writings. In his Hayavadana, Girish Karnad combines the myth from Kathasaritasagara with the tale from Thomas Mann's Transposed Heads. Yayati by Karnad is based on the Mahabharata story. The Ramayana and Mahabharata are the subjects of Ashvin Sanghi's artwork.

Anita Nair employs myth in her novels as well, but in a different way. Her novels are not based on a specific myth like those of the other authors mentioned above, but she does use myth to convey the characters' reasoning for their behaviours. To describe their ideas and emotions, she relates the characters in her stories to mythic creatures. For a more in-depth explanation, it's helpful to understand what myth is and how it and its many components

function in Anita Nair's work.

Meaning of Myth:

While examining myths and legends, it is important to consider the development of the term and how, using the word as it was originally understood, it is critical to making remarks on the present idea of Myth. The word 'myth' comes from the Greek word 'mythos.' In his *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M. H. Abrams pointed out that the word "mythos" means "tale" in ancient Greek. It could be an actual or imagined incident. In essence, a myth is a story within mythology. The creation of the world is described in mythology with magical entities. Social rituals are associated with myths and are linked to the story. However, if the protagonist is a human rather than a supernatural figure, the story is a legend rather than a myth. A folktale is a traditional story that features a hero who is a supernatural entity but not a God. In M.H. Abrams words,

“In Classical Greek, 'mythos' signified any story or plot, whether true or invented. In its central modern significance, however, a myth is one story in mythology- a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and

to establish the sanctions for the rules
by which people conduct their lives.”
(Abrams 230)

However, according to J.A. Cuddon, the word "myth" comes from the Greek word "muthos," which means "anything spoken." The Myth's interpretation and history are both complicated. For storytelling or discourse, Homer used the word 'muthos,' but not for fiction. The Greek term 'muthos' was coined after Homer to describe fiction. Plato uses the term 'muthoi' to describe something that is partly true but mostly false. When the Romans took power, they embraced Greek literature. In Latin, the word 'muthikos' was renamed 'mythicus.' In recent years, the term myth has been understood to refer to a work of fiction that transmits a psychological truth. J.A.Cuddon in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* says;

“In general a myth is a story which is not 'true' and which involves (as a rule) supernatural beings or at any rate supra-human beings. Myth is always concerned with the creation and explains how something came to exist. Myth embodies feeling and concept, hence the Promethean or Herculean figure, the idea of Diana, or the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Many myths or quasi-myths are primitive explanations of the natural order and cosmic forces.” (Cuddon 453)

As a result of the above explanation, myth is regarded as a heavenly disclosure that governs the destiny of natural occurrences. It explains the origins of humans, demise, the universe, and other occurrences, whether they are related to human existence or natural phenomena. Myth is a story that has a deeper significance than it is recounted for its reason. It exemplifies manly behaviour.

In her novel *The Better Man*, Anita Nair deftly employs myth. She used myth to direct the mental processes of the characters and to rationalize their acts. In the novel *The Better Man*, for example, we may see the myth of the Odiyans and Gandharvas. She demonstrates the positive and negative aspects of a character by employing these myths. The focus of this article will be on the usage of myth in the novel named *The Better Man*. The examination of myth is designed to deepen our knowledge of myth in Anita Nair's novel *The Better Man*.

Myth in The Better Man:

Anita Nair doesn't utilize myth in her stories just for the sake of it, it has a deeper significance than isn't immediately apparent. The mention of the Odiyans and the Gandharvas in her work *The Better Man* traces her use of myth. The Odiyan and the Gandharva are myths in Kerala. Gandharvas are magical creatures who lure people, especially women, entice them, and then abandon them, having left them powerless. The Gandharvas aren't very malevolent, but the Odiyans, on the other hand, are. The Odiyans are a dangerous race with magical abilities. At nightfall, Odiyans are much more deadly. Dr. T.D. Beena (Assistant Professor, Dept. of Sanskrit, Maharaja's College, Ernakulam) writes in her journal article "Mythological representations in the tradition of Kerala,"

“In some temples, Gandharva is being
worshipped like Yakshi. Gandharva is

also given the status of sub deity in certain temples. Connected with these myths there is a belief that Yakshi, Gandharva, Odiyan etc. enter the bodies of weak-minded people especially women. To remove these spirits, form human bodies different kinds of rites related to black magic are performed.....”(Beena,13)

Mukundan is the protagonist of the story *The Better Man*. After he arrives at his hometown of 'Kaikurrussi,' he moves back into his ancestral home. He does, however, have frequent hallucinations. In his home, he sees spirit beings, particularly those of his deceased mother. He defends himself by claiming that he is to blame for his mother's death and that she's still haunting him. He imagines his mother scolding him, saying, "Where were you when I needed you? You had the opportunity to save me, but you decided not to.” Mukundan claims that his father, Achutan Nair, murdered his mother to live with his mistress using Odiyan magic. His mother had requested him to accompany her with him before he died, but he had declined. As a result, Mukundan believes he is to blame for his mother's death, and now she is tormenting him.

The Odiyan myth is highly common in Kerala's Palakkad district. Odiyans are those who perform Odividya, which is considered the most terrible form of black magic. Odiyan is a Faustian character who has struck a secret agreement with the demon and earned magical abilities as a result. Shapeshifting, extraordinary strength, climbing a tree at breakneck speed, and other magical feats are among the supernatural abilities. The Odiayan would utilize these

abilities to assassinate his or his benefactor's adversaries by sucking the soul of the target without any of the victim's knowledge. The reason for death would appear to be insignificant, similar to Mukundan's mother's death from a tumble down the steps.

A postmaster named Kamban makes another utilisation of Odiyan magic. He is of Odiyan heritage, but he is powerless. His uncle Chathu possesses Odiyan abilities and assists his nephew with them. Kamban works as a postmaster from the Dalit community. He was just reassigned to Kaikurussi, which he enjoys. He is from a lower caste, so he does not socialize with the other residents of the area. People don't bother him since he has Odiyan lineage, despite the fact that he is from the lower strata. Kamban performs his duties diligently, but his newly moved supervisor Philipose verbally abuses and disrespects him for no apparent reason. When Philipose goes too far and publicly degrades Kamban's pride, Kamban intends to avenge himself and get rid of him.

The apartment next to the post office has been rented by Philipose. Chethu, Kamban's uncle, dispatches his cat or himself to Philipose's house, frightening him with his shape-shifting abilities. Philipose is terrified and flees the village after Cat haunted him in a strange way. This story, as well as Philipose's motive for leaving the Kaikurussi, is recounted by Philipose, in the following words to Mukundan;

“He didn't know how it crept into the room. The cat seemed to find its way in through closed doors and windows. It would pad close to him, staring into his eyes, and mew mockingly. The more Philipose looked at the cat, the

more familiar it seemed.”(Nair , 166)

In the novel *The Better Man*, there is another mythical reference to Gandharva. There is a Valsala incident in the novel. Valsala is a lonesome woman who believes her spouse has abandoned her. Because of his telephone trouble, Mukundan, the novel's central protagonist, learns about her. When he is approached via phone, the call is forwarded to Valsala's residence. As a result, when the matter is handled, Mukundan learns from Bhasi about Valsala's spouse has abandoned her. Mukundan already had lost his mother as a result of his father's abandonment. As a result, he believes Valsala really shouldn't end up the same way, and he begs the police inspector to investigate. He was attempting to rescue Valsala, but he unwittingly assists in the discovery of Valsala's crime of murdering her husband with the cooperation of her boyfriend, Sridharan.

This is significant because Valsala is warned to be wary of Gandharva prior to her wedding. If she escapes on the night when the Pala tree blooms, Gandharva will appear, seduce her, and then abandon her to suffer. When Valsala ventures to venture outdoors on one of these nights, her mother warns her with the following words:

“Tie up your hair and stay inside.
When the pala tree's fragrance fills the
night sky, the Gandharvas come
prowling, looking for virgins to
seduce. Once Gandharva has spotted
you, there is no escape. He'll make you
his slave with his soft voice, gentle
caresses, and sensual magic. No
mortal man will ever be able to satisfy

you then.”(128)

This tale developed in Kerala to educate new maidens about the dangers of premarital affairs. We agonize when we desire things that are beyond our control rather than acquiring them.

In Kerala, Gandharvas are regarded considerably different than in other regions of India. They are Apsaras' counterparts in other regions of India, and their role is to dance and sing in the presence of Indra, the monarch of heaven and Gods. They also use dance to commemorate events like the birth and marriage of Gods, as well as other happy occasions. They are seducers of ladies in Kerala, not dancers. They morph into the most handsome and attractive man, seducing and destroying women sexually. In Kerala, it has spawned a superstition that advises never sleeping without underwear. Yakshis, who are different from Apsaras, are Gandharvas' female counterparts. Yakshis are men's seducers.

Conclusion:

Mythology has been written about by a number of English poets and novelists. Mythological literature is now becoming a new genre throughout this period. In comparison to other authors, Anita Nair incorporated myth in her stories in a unique way. She doesn't build her stories on a single myth, but rather uses them to illustrate a point. Anita Nair, in the style of a regional novelist, draws forth the Odiyan and Gandharva myth, which is unique to the Kerala region. Anita Nair, an Indian writer in English, goes to considerable lengths in her novels to explain Indian mythology in a way that fits her fiction.

References :

1. Abrams, M. H. Glossary of Literary Terms. Delhi: Cengage Learning India Private Limited Delhi, 2012.
2. Beena, T. D. & “Mythological representations in the tradition of Kerala.” National Journal of Sanskrit and Hindi Research

(2017): 58-60. PDF.

3. Cuddon, J. A. Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory. New Delhi: Penguin India, 2013. Book.
4. Nair, Anita. The Better Man. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999. Book.