

## Myth in Sri Aurobindo's Poem: 'Love and Death'

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### Abstract

*The poem "Love and Death" is a mythical poem which is based on Indian epic, The Mahabharata and the Greek Mythical story, Orpheus and Eurydice. In this paper, I focus the light on the poem from the angle of mythical point. The theme of love predominates over death. Here the hero, Ruru due to his youthfulness and deep passion for love makes an arduous journey for entering into the kingdom of death to meet Yama, to get back the life of his beloved Priyumvada. Thus the whole journey and his struggle against the God of death in patala for the soul of his beloved are described from mythical point.*

**Keywords:** Myth, Love, Death, Hell, Fate, God.

Myth is a traditional or legendary story. It is derived from the Greek word 'Mythos' which simply means 'story'. The active being in myths are generally gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines or animals and plants. Most myths are set in a timeless past before recorded time or beginning of the critical history. A myth is a sacred narrative because it holds religious or spiritual significance for those who tell it. Myths also contribute to and express a cultural system of thought and values. The Oxford Dictionary defines the term, myth thus: "A purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural person's actions or events and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena".

The definition clearly brings out three important basic aspects of the term, Firstly, Myth is a purely imaginative narrative. Secondly, it usually involves supernatural persons, actions or events; lastly, it embodies some popular ideas concerning natural or historical

phenomena. The definition gives in Roger Fowler's 'A dictionary of Modern Critical Terms (1973)' is more explicit for it gives almost all the important elements of the term 'Myth'. These are follows: (i) myth is a story of indefinite origin or authorship; (ii) it either accompanies or helps to explain some religious belief; (iii) the subject may be of an incredible or supernatural nature; (iv) the subject may establish a change in the workings of the universe or in the social life of mankind.

The poem "Love and Death", a Hindu symbolic mythical poem is the first narrative poem in which Sri Aurobindo expresses the triumph of love over death. The story of the poem is taken from the Adi Parva of the epic *The Mahabharata* and from the Greek Mythology of *Orpheus and Eurydice*. The poem was written by him when he returned in Indian from England spending his childhood, educational period there. During that period he was acquainted with the classical Greek and Latin literature and translated those texts into English or vice versa for preparing in his examination there. So the Greek and Latin elements have already entered into his mind and heart. Thus the myth of Eurydice –Orpheus symbolising the triumph of love over death became the poet's lifetime passion seeking expression especially through his narrative poetry. After reaching in Indian from England, he was interested for studying *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata*, *The Gita*, *The Veda* and *The Upanishad*. He was attracted towards the Indian culture, ways of life, temperamental feeling and preferences for the all that was Indian.

There is a close similarity between the story of *Love and Death* and that of *Orpheus and Eurydice*. I focus on briefly the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus was a musician who had the magical power to win the heart of every being by his soothing tune and even he could stop the course of river also by that power. Unfortunately one day a snake bit his wife, Eurydice and she died. So he decided to go to hell to meet the God of Death to get back her life. In the underworld of God of death he played his musical instrument, lyre to express his saddest grief and thus he won the heart of Hades, the God of Death. Ultimately he released the

soul of Eurydice with condition. Thus Sri Aurobindo has taken this basic plot from this mythical poem and built up this Indian poem based on Greek Myth.

The story has also close association with the Indian Epic, *The Mahabharata*. The plot of the story of *Love and Death* which is found in it is stated here briefly. One day Ruru, the hero saw Pramadvara, heroine in the woods, playing with her friends. He fell in love with her and proposed to marry her. So both the family consented to this marriage but suddenly one day Pramadvara died due to the biting of a snake. On seeing the sorrow of Ruru, Devadutta, the mess anger from God came to him and promised him to get back her life on the condition of giving the half span of his life. Ruru accepted the deal and became happy to get back her in his life. Then they both got married. Then he took vow of killing all the serpents he saw. One day while he was about to kill a snake like he had done before many, he heard a voice asking him to stop killing snake. Actually, it was the voice of serpent Dundubha who was actually a Muni turned into a snake by the curse of the Rishi Khadama. He was happy at last to get rid of from the cursed life of snake by the meeting of Ruru who was destined to release him from this curse.

In a letter Sri Aurobindo spoke to his brother about myth,

I would carefully distinguish between two types of myth, the religious-philosophical allegory and the genuine secular legend. The former is beyond the pale of profitable argument. Created by the allegorical and symbolising spirit of medieval Hinduism, the religious myths are a type of poetry addressed to a particular mental constitution, and the sudden shock of the bizarre repels occidental imagination the moment it comes in contact with Puranic literature, reveals to us where the line lies that must eternally divide East from West. (Letters of Sri Aurobindo 45)

The poem, "Love and Death" is composed in June –July 1899 and falls thus well with the Baroda Period. In the poem of 'Love and Death' Ruru, the great grandson of Bhrigu Muni was born to Rishi Pramati and Apsara Gritachee. Pramadvara was the daughter of Menaka, an

Apsara and Vishwavasus, the Gandharva King. She was brought up by Sthulakesha, the rishi with natural beauty of the forest and its grandeur. She is so bright and lovely that he named her Pramadvarya 'the most beautiful among women'. Sri Aurobindo deviates a little for he mentions Chitruruth, the Gandharva king as the father of Pramadvarya and substitutes Priyuvada for Pramadvarya to suit the English tongue.

The poem is romantic narrative that revolves around Ruru, son of Chyavan and grandson of Bhrigu, the Rishi of Vedic literature. The poet describes Ruru's birth with some details-

He has the blood of Gods and Titans old  
An Apsara his mother liquid-orbed  
Bore to the youthful Chyavan's strong embrace  
This passionate face of earth with Eden touched.

Ruru who had 'become a great Rishi like his father' was in his youth "engrossed with his love for a beautiful girl whom he had made his wife, the daughter of the Gandharva king, Chitruruth, by the sky-nymph Menaca." (SABCL 27)

'In the Woodlands of the bright and early world', Ruru and Priyuvada were so happy and absorbed in their young life that they thought they existed only for each other. The earth then was full of lofty trees and teeming with life. The feelings and love of Priyuvada are described thus-

When love was to himself yet new and warm  
And stainless, played like morning with flower  
Ruru with his young bride Priyuvada.  
.....  
To love, to Ruru; Ruru, a happy flood  
Of passion round a lotus dancing thrilled,  
Blinded with his soul's waves Priyuvada. (2-9)

The emotional touch of love changes the mundane feeling and thought of Ruru and Priyuvada "To him the earth was a bed for this sole flower/ To her all the world was filled with his

embrace”. (10-11) Ruru loved his daily duties and always came back to his young bride, eager to feel her glad beauty. He was overwhelmed with joy with love and light of hope to lead a happy conjugal life.

But suddenly one day when Ruru was coming back to her and on hearing ‘at once his footsteps’ had looked up smiling, a snake- bite killed her. He was so stunned by this unexpected loss that he sat unable to move. The pathos and the deep tragedy of the untimely death of Priyumvada is vividly sketched by the poet thus, ‘...O love!/ Alas the green dear home that I must leave/ So early!’ (13-14).

God was frighten by his utter silence of losing Priyumvada from his life. But he never allowed sorrow to overcome him. The God realised his condition and sent a messenger to the Ashwatha tree. Agni himself appeared and requested it to sacrifice itself so as to make Ruru transform into illusioned world of realising the presence the of his beloved Priyumvada. But as soon as he understood how his sensation was deprived by false illusion, being angry he burnt the half of the tree. But he soon regretted his anger to have burned an innocent tree. During his wandering in the forest he met the god of love, Madan. Ruru asked him for only one boon: the power to find Priyumvada and bring her back to life. Madan showed him the way, gave him a magic flower to protect him through his hazardous journey and disappeared.

With the help of flower Ruru entered into the world of ‘untimely dead’. He moved into the hall of the ‘God Death’. Here Yama and ‘Vast Time and irreparable Death’ sit together and Yama tried to dissuade him and explained the different stages in life. He convinced Ruru to go back to earth as the laws of life and death could not be changed at the demand of one man. But Ruru did not give up his hope of returning the life of Priyumvada. So he was warned that at the cost half the span of his own life he could get Priyumvada back. Gathering the courage he accepted the deal and he hurled himself to the feet of the God of Death. Even he had to cross twelve times the river of Boithorini to reach the lowest kingdom of hell. Then he approached

to her and at his touch her drooping form comes to life. Then Ruru woke up ‘as on bed’ surfacing from his strange journey. Gradually he got back his consciousness from the world of hell to the real world of ‘...grass and dense trees/And sunshine...’ And soon, the warmth of the old essential Earth surrounds them. The continuity of life is established. ‘...the earth breathed round them, / Glad of her children, and the coil’s voice/Persisted in the morning of the world’ (30-33).

In this poem the central focus is on the contrast between the powers of God of Love and the God of death i.e Kama verses Yama but both these gods have shades of their Greek counterparts as they have been found in this work.

In a letter to his brother Monmohan he compares the Ruru myth to the Orpheus and Eurydice’s story of the Greek myth.

... The incident of Orpheus’s descent into Hades, his conquering Death and Hell by his music and harping his love back to sunlight and the tragic of losing her at the moment of success through a natural and beautiful human weakness has infinite fancy pathos, trembling human emotion. ( ISMAP 190)

Through the composition of the poem, “Love and Death”, Sri Aurobindo has shown the use of Indian Myth and legends. The concept of myth is hidden in the poem. The story of Love and Death is based on *Mahabharata* which is the store house of different tales and myths. The concept of God of Love, kama or Madan and the God of death, Yama who is surrounded by serpents are the all mythical references. Yama and his hell have a close affinity with the Greek myth. In this context, Sunayana Panda spoke in her article “Influence of Greek Mythology in Love and death”

Yama has a poise and a wisdom which has a human quality and in this it makes him more Greek than Indian. Even the underworld where he lives has a striking resemblance as it is described in Greek myths. Ruru must first cross a river which divides the living from the dead, on which a boatman appears. This immediately reminds us of the river Styx and Charon

who in Greek myths ferries the dead across the river. At the place of Yama, Ruru even sees a three-headed dog, which once again is reminiscent of Cerberus of Greek mythology. (Reddy 138)

The reference of Patala i.e. Hell and its pictorial references and Ruru's descent into underworld described by Aurobindo are vivid and explicit on the ground of myth. The God and fate dominate over human thought and feelings. The descent of the anger of Ruru converted into fire that destroyed the Uswutta tree.

... O uswutth-tree, wantonly who hast mocked  
 My anguish with the wind, but thou no more  
 Have joy of the cool wind nor green delight,  
 But live thy guilty leaves in fire, so long  
 As Aryan wheels by thy doomed shadow vast  
 Thunder to war, nor bless with cool wide waves  
 Lyric Saruswathi nations impure" (4-10)

Sri Aurobindo has chosen the structure of mythical story to justify the ways of God to men like Milton has done in the epic *Paradise Lost*. He treated theme based on human experience. Even he dealt with gods as human beings who cannot escape from the clutches of the Fate, the visible experience moulded by the Time and the will, the supreme commander of the Universe. Hera said to Zeus in *Iliad* by Homer.

All things are by Time and the will eternal that moves us  
 And for each birth its hour is set in the night or the dawning  
 There is an hour for knowledge, an hour to forget and to labour. (*The Epic Chapter iv- 400*)

He is a scientific analyser of the bonding between god and human being. Following the typical concept of Hindu religion as God remains in the soul of human being. Sri Aurobindo portrays each character participating war as an echo of divine soul. Sri Aurobindo's emphasis on the existence of the Divine reality in the mythical story makes it universal.

The myth of Ruru has a symbolic meaning. Ruru is the ideal husband and lover of his wife, he does not hesitate to give away half of his life in order to regain her spirit from *patala* to life. The picture of Hell in words is so vivid that its fearful atmosphere flashes in mind. The sole theme of the poem is that love can conquer death and even any obstacle in dark hell. “The interpretive vision and idea have in the presentation to seem to arise out of inner mind life of vital types of the human soul or individual representative of it through an evolution of speech leading to an evolution of action” (Future Poetry).

This narrative poem makes a great platform for next great epic, “The Savitri”. The seed of the theme of love and death is explicitly manifested in the epic. So the mini epic “love and death” is the source of inspiration for the grand mythical and symbolic epic, “The Savitri” where the love dominates and defeats the death that is described vividly through different stages there.

Man has to solve the problem of life from within his inner being. Man’s ascent to the spirit and the descent of the spirit into humanity can transform the earthly nature. Humanity awaits this new birth for the solution of painful problem of life. “Myths are said to originate in collective desire, a sort of wish-fulfilment. And this desire of overcoming the powers of death has been in the heart of mankind for a long time indeed, if not to conquer wholly then at least to lessen its inexorable clutches” (Panda 137). Sri Aurobindo’s poem “love and Death” brings us hope, for he shows us that the only power which can save this world from that dark shadow is Love.

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