Myths and Its Role in Contemporary Society: A Critique of Saraswati Nagpal's *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*

Joydev Maity

Abstract

From a society, guided by superstitious beliefs to a scientifically developed society; from a child's fairytale-like imagination to an adult's logical thinking, myths have always played a pivotal role. Like its origin, myths' role varies from culture to culture and this role is always lurking in the unconscious aspects of society; it just requires a worthy soul to comprehend its worth. A culture which is devoid of myths is devoid of religion itself. There always runs an endless discussion regarding the validity and worth of myths in society and human lives. But barring aside this argument, contemporary mythological writers have expressed their opinions through their writings and their constant affinity to mythological themes and characters that there is something worthy about myths. Many contemporary writers are using and exploiting myths both morally and aesthetically through graphic novels. Though the presentation of the sacred stories of myths in a genre like graphic novels has been put into question many a time, it is a quite apprehensible fact that less narration in graphic novels gives more leeway to the readers to explore their critical thinking and interpretation convincingly. Besides, with the graphic designs, these novels have more lasting impression on readers than common narrative tradition. This paper will deal with the role of myths in contemporary society both aesthetically and morally with special regard to Saraswati Nagpal's *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*.

Keywords: Contemporary society, culture, graphic novel, myths, role.

Myths as a culmination of tradition and storytelling, aesthetic and religious preaching are what Levi-Strauss called is the 'language' (29) in contemporary society. In fact, myths have been always a medium of expression as far as human's hidden thoughts are concerned even before the existence of human civilization. In the earliest time, before the evolution of language, people used to communicate via bodily expression and there was an urge to tell and narrate stories. Thus they used to draw and carve pictures of familiar things on stones or in barks. These were the earliest example of storytelling and mythological traditions and with the evolution of time, they were given the aesthetic and ethical values. Mythological elements are the tools which artists in present time use to make their writings both entertaining and instructional which further enables a reader to peep into the ancient history, its origin and their relation with their nation, reflecting on Levi-Strauss' view that "With myths, everything becomes possible" (31).

Though every country has its own version of myths originating in different times and cultures, they are all connected by a single pattern which Joseph Campbell in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* described as monomyth or one myth. From its beginning, myths' usefulness and truthfulness have always been doubted and many times they were shattered by superstitious beliefs of common people. However, after the enlightenment in the eighteenth century, myths made its strong clasp among people's beliefs which was aided by the revival of them by many prominent writers like Kenneth Burke in literature, Mirca Eliade in religion, Paul Ricoeur in philosophy and Levi Strauss in anthropology. J.R.R. Tolkien's poem "Mythopoeia" claims how even C.S. Lewis described myths as "lies and therefore worthless" though eventually, he removed himself from the infertile thought and in a letter to Arthur Greeves in 1931 he described the story of Christ as myth with its real happening. Lewis' doubts over the truthfulness of myths originated not from his scepticism about mythology, rather he could not get at first the meaning of the word 'God' and the concept of 'God' and its association

with religion especially, when 'God' acts as a metaphor. Thus Joseph Campbell in his *Joseph Campbell: A Hero's Journey* wrote: "God is a metaphor for a mystery that absolutely transcends all human categories of thought, even the categories of being and non-being" (135).

From a curious reader to critics or even by a reporter, the value and role of myths in contemporary society have always been questioned. Have myths no role to play now apart from the tradition of storytelling? Has it become only a medium of entertainment and a medium of time pass? Any myths that originated in earlier time may have lost its traditions from contemporary society but has never lost its significance: the ethical and moral values it carries, the unity and social norms it sustains. Joseph Campbell in his *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* emphasized on myths' metaphysical, cosmological and pedagogical function; but the most important part of both Campbell and the German Friedrich Nietzsche is that they both emphasized on the social value of myths, especially how myths act as a unifying force both individually and socially in the modern and post-modern society. Nietzsche in his *The Birth of Tragedy* associated myths with a culture's creative aspects and emphasized how it acts as a unifying force among diverse cultures.

Over the period of time, myths have such an ardent influence on writers that they did not bind themselves with traditional myths rather they created their own artificial, imaginary or what J.A. Cuddon calls as the creation of private mythology. This myth-making was initially termed as 'mythopoeia' (Cuddon 527) and was popularized by J.R.R Tolkien through his poem of the same name. This mythopoeia most of the times includes the recreation of a traditional myth from an author's personal perspective or sometimes from a societal point of view. Apart from Tolkien, this myth-making was exploited by C.S. Lewis in his *Chronicles of Narnia*, William Blake in *Jerusalem*, Lord Dunsany in his *The Gods of Pegana* and many more. Barring the cultural and country's boundary, this myth-making grasped the Indian author also and in the contemporary time there are numerous writings dealing with the re-creation of myth. In

India, this trend was commenced by M.T. Vasudevan Nair with his *Randamoozham* and popularized by authors like Amish Tripathi with his *Shiva* trilogy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni with his *The Palace of Illusion* or Ashok Banker and Devdutt Pattanaik's many works. This trend gives the authors immense freedom to ponder with traditional myth and sometimes to deal with societal issue. For example Amruta Patil's graphic novel *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean*, a retelling of the story of the *Mahabharata* is narrated by the river Ganga and concerns about the environmental issue.

Indian (Hindu) mythology is unique in the world from a few perspectives. First, it is one of the oldest myths in the world and the sermons and practical moral preaching it conveys have a universal appeal. Hindu mythology has its fullest exposal in two Indian great epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata,* in Vedic literature, Puranas, the *Bhagavad Gita* or even in the *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesha* and they influenced not only the native writers to write about them but western writers also enjoyed dealing with them. Thus, T.S. Eliot's theory of birth and re-birth expressed in many of his poems is an influence of Hindu mythology, even his *The Waste Land* ends with the chanting of shantih which is inspired by the ending of the Upanishads; in Derek Walcott's "The Sadhu of Couva" there are references to Diwali, Hanuman and the *Ramayana,* there are also numerous translations of the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and Upanishads by western writers. While writing about the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, Jawaharlal Nehru in his *The Discovery of India* wrote: "I do not know of any books anywhere which have exercised such a continuous and pervasive influence on the mass mind as these two" (99). These Indian myths even sometimes made some western writers an escapist from their own country, culture and tradition. Thus Michelet, the French historian in 1864 wrote: "Everything is narrow in the west – Let me look towards lofty Asia (qtd. in Sucheta et al. 59).

In recent times, Indian mythology has gained a new status through their depiction in graphic novels which believe in the proverb 'less is more'. With their limited narration and intense graphic design, they at once capture the reader's aesthetic sense. Thus Francis Ames-Lewis in his *Michelangelo: The Sistine Chapel Ceiling* wrote: "The sublime in painting … takes such a possession of the whole mind, that no room is left for attention to minute criticism" (156). These narratives, most of which are either a retelling of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* or representation of few characters from these two deal with love, honour, pride, valour and justice in a new imaginary context and they at once provide an aesthetic experience to the readers. Thus there are *18 Days* by Grant Morrison which deals with episodes from the *Mahabharata, Ravanayan* by Vivek Goel deals with the demonic-king from *the Ramayana*, *Ramayan 3392 A.D*. by Deepak Chopra and Shekhar Kapur which is set in a post-apocalyptic world, and of course *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*, a retelling of the life of Sita from the epic the *Ramayana*.

Saraswati Nagpal's *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* (2011) with its enhancing illustration by Manikanandan is unique in quite a few aspects. Firstly, unlike many contemporary graphic novels which deal with mythological theme it is not set in the contemporary society, rather it is set at a time when 'gods and demons walked the earth alongside mortals' (Nagpal 5). Secondly, it is not a reconstruction of the traditional myth, rather a re-telling of the life of Sita, the wife of Rama from the *Ramayana* with no alteration at all. The novel itself deals with the life of one of the most virtuous women from ancient time who with her gentle nature, unconditional love, strong spirit and obeyed personality still finds the place in the heart of almost every Indian. While writing about Sita, Swami Vivekananda outburst: "All our mythology may vanish… but so long as there will be five Hindus living here, there will be the story of Sita" (77; vol. IV). Sita's struggle against the strict rules of a kingdom and her

repetitious attempts to prove her virtue is a synonym to the struggle of woman in contemporary society against the rock-hearted patriarchy.

The story is set during 'Treta Yuga', a time when miracles or misfortune can happen in one's life in a second though essentially it is a universal phenomenon. The story is described from Sita's point of view and she at the very beginning of the novel discloses that – "I was destined to be a princess" (5) and the rest of the novel describes her struggle, brief moment of happiness and blessing with Rama and also how she associated herself with a divine figure. From the beginning of her life, she was attributed divine elements: her birth itself was a result of earnest devotion and prayers of her parents to Bhudevi and as a child her moving of the great bow at the beginning of the novel in her house is also a matter of divine presence. In her childhood, Sita was attracted to the stories of legendary women and as a blessing of Bhudevi, was an earnest devotee to her, a quality which was transferred to her from her parents. One of the main reasons which helped Sita in later life to become a fearless and indomitable figure is that her trust in her God-mother who makes her aware that she will protect her at every moment.

Sita and Rama's love and life as a couple are based on an echt version of ideal love which often acts as a learning miniature for any lovers. However, Sita is genuine but not a blind lover; rather she is a witty and judgmental person. Even before she saw Rama, she felt in love with him after Rama and Lakshmana came out victorious against the 'rakshasas' and often daydreamt about him but also imagined Rama as a 'handsome' (18) figure. Sita is not an outspoken character, she could not express her love for Rama to anyone, instead, she asks for a 'swayamvara' to choose her husband but at the same time hoping for Rama to be her husband. Sita has a divine vision who can truly judge a person very quickly; if she noticed Rama's 'handsome' appearance at her first meeting with him she also noticed his shining soul while speaking with him. As Sita's prayer to Bhudevi was from heart and based on pure devotion, it was bound to be fulfilled and thus followed an aged-long love story.

Man's first priority should always be to perform and respect his duty no matter whatever position one holds. As Sita's identity is now better suited as a wife of Rama than a daughter of Janaka and Sunaina; more identifiable as a princess of Ayodhya than of Videha so now her husband Rama and the people of Ayodhya, its laws and her duty towards its people are more important to her than her own life. As time progresses she becomes what her mother wished – 'Rama's strength' and his 'firm friend' (25). Throughout history, conspiracy and ill-provocation have always played a vital role and even potential enough to destroy and mislead a virtuous soul. Just when Rama was going to be crowned with the status of the king in Ayodhya, Manthara's ill-provocation leads Kaikeyi to urge Dasharatha to fulfil the promised two boons. Kaikeyi's demands of kingship for her son Bharata and Rama's banishment to Dandaka Forest had disastrous effects on Dasharatha but he knows the value of promise and that it should be kept especially being a Kshatriya. Genuine love always follows one another; as Rama is ready for his life in forest, even a 'delicate princess' like Sita does not dither to go and live with Rama in jungle where one has to struggle hard to get all the basic necessity like food or sleep; thus she boldly utters: "All of which I am capable of doing" (25, 34).

Whether it is the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*, both emphasized the importance of human relationships and they may be of lovers, parents, brothers or sisters. A true relationship acts as a barrier against a stormy wind, protecting from every outside humdrum. The relationship of brotherhood as portrayed in the Ramayana, hence in this novel is of paramount importance regarding our contemporary society. If brotherhood is a coin then Rama and Lakshmana hold one side each, without one side the other side has no value. As Rama is prepared to leave the palace and is ready to live in the forest, Lakshmana is determined to join Ram and Sita. The pleasure of a royal palace is nothing to him as compared to his love and respect for his brother; he is the 'shadow' of Rama who must assist him wherever he goes. If Lakshmana is the owner of the garden of brotherhood then Bharata is also a part of it. Bharata

knows that the crown of the Sun Dynasty 'rightfully' (35, 42) is Rama's, his prick of conscience drives him not only to renounce the glorious throne but he also rejects every comfort of a kingship. Besides, he has also taken an oath of living a life of a hermit and would return the kingship to Rama as soon as Rama would return to Ayodhya. Such love, respect, understanding and sympathy from a brother every human being wish for; many people of the contemporary time may be jealous of such comradeship at the same, time is also one of the many aspects from the novel which one may emulate for the betterment of society.

Forgiveness is the trait of a strong person and calmness that of an intelligent person; Rama's personality is defined by both these traits which many aspire to possess. Despite Kaikeyi's deception and ill behaviour towards him, Rama not only forgives her at once when she comes to the forest to meet them but also advises Lakshmana and Bharata to do so. Rama knows that anger and hatred for others have much destructive power which can destroy a person from inside. His forgiveness is not inspired by self-gaining only; he still has also respect for Kaikeyi and comes to her defence when Bharata and Lakshmana tried to scold her. It is certain that Rama and Sita's love is built with so much trust and respect to each other that it is invulnerable. However, on quite a few occasions Rama's treatment and behaviour towards Sita can be questioned. After Sita's rescue and return from Lanka, Rama's refusal to accept Sita as her wife poses question about his trust towards Sita as Sita utters: "My husband no longer trusted me" (73). However, one should keep in mind that as a king Rama is subjected to its rules of the kingdom and its people; he has not lost his faith on Sita rather he is more respective and responsive towards his duty and laws of Ayodhya. Being a king is not a matter of trivial significance; one has to sacrifice his own love also to be a supreme, generous, kind and loyal ruler.

Sita is a soft, kind and loving woman yet capable of taking obdurate decision especially when her self-respect and chastity is doubted. Thrice in the novel, she has to face the anguish

and doubt regarding her purity and chastity; though the questions were raised by the common people of the kingdom she always expected the support from her husband. If Sita has to face the ill-talking and harsh rumours of the people, Rama has to face the inner conflicts. Rama's strict adherence to the rule of kingdom forced him to treat Sita not as a wife rather as a common people when she was rescued and returned from Ravana's greed. Even 'agni pariksha' and twelve years in forest were not enough to prove her chastity and she decided to return from where she came, leaving this earthly life. Sita may here seem an escapist and coward woman but truly she understands that 'mortal memories are fickle' (88), who forget tomorrow which he witnesses today. The bond of mutual trust, love and respect which is broken by Rama could also be repaired by him, but he is too fickle, too earthly a ruler to grasp the purity of Sita. Only a virtuous and divine mother can grasp the virtue and chastity of her daughter and Sita knows that returning to Bhudevi is the only way to prove her virtue and so she disappears into the earth, after all, she is the Daughter of the Earth.

Works Cited

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero's Journey: Joseph Campbell on His Life and Work*. New World Library, 2014.

Cuddon, J.A. *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*. Penguin Books, 1999, p. 527.

"J.R.R. Tolkien's Poem "Mythopeia." Recited by Becca Tarnas." *YouTube*, uploaded by 0ThouArtThat0, 20 Jan 2015, www.youtube.be/N9REb8p7HtQ.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. "The Structural Study of Myth." *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol.68, no. 270, 1955, pp. 29-31. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/536768.

Mazumdar, Sucheta, et al., editors. *From Orientalism to Postcolonialism: Asia, Europe and the Lineages of Difference*. Routledge, 2010.

Nagpal, Saraswati. *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*. Campfire, 2011.

Nehru, Jawaharlal. *The Discovery of India*. Penguin India, 2008.

Reynolds, Joshua. *Michelangelo: The Sistine Chapel Ceiling*. Norton, 1972.

Vivekananda, Swami. "Lectures and Discourses: The Ramayana." *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. iv, Swami Ananyananda, 1958, p.77.

About the Author

Joydev Maity obtained M.A. in English from Banaras Hindu University, India. He may be contacted at joydevmaity1993@gmail.com.