

# Reconstruction and Treatment of Myths in Sudhir Kakar's "The Ascetic of Desire" and Githa Hariharan's "When Dreams Travel"

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Myth can be defined as a story that is self-evident. All myths are part of some or other stories such as the stories about Indian gods and goddesses. It is regarded as a common belief or credo. It is a form of perception, a way of life or a process of thought. Myths may also convey the anxieties prevalent in all or any society. They forge communal living through their explanations regarding the origin of social phenomena, relationships between human beings, gods and goddesses, the universe and so on. Sociologist, Bronislaw Bajon, defines myth as - "When human beings take tentative hypotheses (including theories) which explain the origins of the universe and accept them as absolute truth, myth is born".

There are some common questions that unite different disciplines of myth. Three leading questions of them are about the origin, function, and subject-matter of the myth. Origin means why and how myth arises, and function deals with why and how myth prevails. The answer to both these questions is usually a need, for the fulfillment of which myth originates and prevails in order to continue its fulfillment. Why myths are needed has also been explained differently by different theorists of myth. Subject matter means the referent of the myth, such as some theories read myth literally; as a result the referent for them is straightforward and apparent. Some other theories read myth symbolically and the symbolic referent can be anything to anyone, as Sudhir Kakar remarks, "The myth, in its basic sense as an explanation for natural and cultural phenomena, as an organizer of experience, is verily at the heart of the matter" (Kakar, 1990, p. 2).

## Types of Myth

In his book, *Myth*, Laurence Coupe, a literary critic, writer, and professor, divides myth into four categories - fertility myth, creation myth, deliverance myth and hero myth. Fertility myth is related to agriculture. It involves sacrifice and plantation of bodily parts in order to germinate the crop. Gods and goddesses of vegetation are an integral part of fertility myth, for instance, Egyptian god of vegetation, Osiris. Creation myth, also called

cosmogonic myth, functions as a foundation stone of a particular culture, tradition or society. It is a symbolic saga about the genesis of the world as well as human life, such as the Babylon myth. The deliverance myth deals with some rescue from bondage. It entails a god who frees his people from the bondage of some power which may or may not be supernatural, for example the myth of celebrating 'the Passover' by Hebrews to commemorate the savings of their god Yahweh. It induces an unswerving faith in the god, promoting him to a universal God, hence religious in nature. The hero myth is an account of a person's life, either male or female. The hero sets out on a journey that is often adventurous, overcomes hardships and hurdles, completes the journey and comes back. The hero, as an infant, is also often abandoned by the parents, for instance, King Oedipus, and Perseus.

Besides these four kinds of myth Kees W Bolle, a writer on religion and myth, proposes eight more types of myth. Myth of eschatology and destruction is concerned with the death or end of something. Such kind of myths deal with a primordial time where there is no existence of death and describes that it arises as a result of some fault or punishment on the part of human beings; or probably due to the concern of earth's getting overcrowded. The messianic and millenarian myths are concerned with the hope of a new world. They induce a belief that the culture hero will return one day with a command to fight against the evil forces present in the society. The myth of time and eternity tells the relationship between time periods on earth and the eternity. It divides the origin of the world into a number of ages, prominently four ages. For instance, Indian mythology divides the world into four yugas (ages) - Satya-Yuga, Treta-Yuga, Dwapar-Yuga, and Kali-Yuga. The days are also timed according to the regulations of sun and moon. Myth of providence and destiny is about astronomy, fate, and the connection between human beings and stars. It tells how man can not defy his/her fate and becomes powerless in the face of destiny. The myth of rebirth and renewal deals with the reincarnation of the world, nature, and human beings life after life. The cyclic patterns of the seasons are an integral part of this myth.

Myth of memory and forgetting is related to one's remembrance of his/her previous life. However, this is not possible for ordinary human beings; only rare beings are supposed to remember their past life. This myth is a part of the tradition where the myth of rebirth also exists. According to Indian mythology, the veil of 'maya' (illusion) abstains one from remembering his/her origin and aim. Each mythology contains the myth of high beings and celestial gods. It concerns both polytheistic and

monotheistic religions taking into account their respective gods and deities. For instance the gods or deities of atmospheric phenomena such as sun, water, sky, fire, rain, thunder, etc. Another myth included by Bolle is that of religious founders and religious figures. It involves personages like Confucius, Zoroaster, the Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Mani, and Muhammad. Though they are widely believed to have existed at some point but their very acknowledgment as being extraordinary marks them somewhat mythical for later generations. The prophets, saints, and Hindu spiritual gurus are also part of this myth. The myth of kings and ascetics also forms a part of many mythologies. Kings have been regarded as mediators between the divine world and the human world. The king is also believed to be the protector, and some myths consider the god of fertility to be present in the king. The ascetics also in myriads of ancient mythological texts have been demonstrated as an 'out of the world' like figure that brings them within the contours of myth. The final myth discussed by Bolle is that of transformation. It involves cosmic changes and 'rites of passage' (rites of the birth, maturity, marriage, and death) which perform the transformation of human beings. Rites of passage are still performed in the present world religions such as baptism, marriage, and death rites. Apart from these myths, there are many beliefs which add to the corpus of myths, for instance, to believe what is good and what is bad on the basis of assumptions rather than facts.

Sudhir Kakar and Githa Hariharan's fictitious works, like many other writers, are based on ancient myths. Where Sudhir Kakar's *The Ascetic of Desire* is formed on the Indian myth of Vatsyayana, Githa Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* is a reincarnation of the Persian myth of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Both Kakar and Hariharan have reconstructed the ancient myths in their twentieth-century modern novels without affecting the symbolic richness of the myths.

It is believed that Vatsyayana wrote *Kamasutra* somewhere in the fourth century, but the paucity of information about Vatsyayana and the validation of *Kamasutra* make them both a myth. However, Sudhir Kakar, in *The Ascetic of Desire*, attempts to give Vatsyayana a fictional biography as nothing has ever been known about him with any degree of veracity. Thus, the novel itself becomes a paradigm of the hero myth as it narrates the account of Vatsyayana's life and adventures. Vatsyayana himself is mythically being considered as an ascetic who draws the knowledge of sex through austerities and meditations, and composes *Kamasutra* on the dictation of god Kama's wife, Rati. On the other hand, *The Arabian Nights* or *One Thousand and One Nights* "are basically folk tales that originated in

Persia, India and Arabian countries and have been passed on to generations through oral and written prose and verse” (Sharma, 2014, p. 4). These tales are mythical in their very origin and the palimpsest novel *When Dreams Travel* is a modified replica of them. As Hariharan’s novel narrates the adventurous journey of Shahrzad throughout one thousand and one nights, so she also becomes a symbol of the hero myth.

Apart from *Kamasutra*, Kakar has also incorporated the myths pertaining to the Gupta period, during which Vatsyayana is believed to have lived. There is the myth of providence and destiny depicted through the stars like Arundhati (the Alcor Star) and Dhruva (the Pole Star) whom a courtesan describes in the words below:

That one is Arundhati who is hard to see; however anyone who is unable to see her will die within six months. And there is Dhruva, the unmoving polestar. If you can see it during the day all your sins will be washed away. (Kakar, 1998, p. 5)

This particular myth loaded instance from the novel conveys the connection between stars and human beings that people have come to believe since ages. The *Ascetic of Desire* also demonstrates how Vatsyayana concludes the arts of lovemaking into sixty-four due to the various myths attached to this number such as according to the Ayurvedic medical texts, there are sixty-four prominent diseases in human body, and the ancient laws of Manu consider the guilt of a thieving Brahmin sixty-four times greater than people of other castes.

Avantika and Shahrzad’s obsession for mirrors in *The Ascetic of Desire* and *When Dreams Travel* respectively correspond to the myth of narcissism. Both Kakar and Hariharan’s selected novels are also marked with the myths of female sexuality, especially the volatility of female sexuality. In *The Ascetic of Desire*, it has been signified through Vatsyayana as he narrates, “Fire is not satisfied by all the wood in the forest, the ocean by all the rivers, the god of death by all the living beings and a woman by all the men” (Kakar, 1998, p. 33). This is the most prominent myth of female sexuality in the novel to which even Vatsyayana does not conform. On the other side, Githa Hariharan has also accentuated the same myth in the very beginning of the novel, “Do you not know that a feast cannot be merry with fewer than four companions, and that women cannot be truly happy without men?” (Hariharan, 2008, p. 3). By referring to such myths, both novelists have celebrated the female sexuality as well as womanhood in their concerned novels which is quite contrary to the contemporary scenario in which women have been subjugated and exploited most prominently on sexual and gender basis.

Kakar's myth of female sexuality leads to another myth, as the references to Lord Shiva, King Ila, and King Bhangasvana are clear instances of the myth of Transformation. The Trinity is mythically believed to have the experience of both male and female sexuality due to their being transformed into females for some time under the effect of certain curses. While his lectures on sexuality Vatsyayana narrates the mythically believed differences between a male and female sexual pleasure, such as:

. . . a woman's boldness in matters of love is six times as great as a man, and her delight in its pleasures eight times as great. . . . .  
Because of the pain she has to go through during childbirth, the gods have compensated her with greater pleasure in the act that initiates it. (Kakar, 1998, p. 36)

Vatsyayana narrates these myths from his knowledge of ancient texts in which they have been mentioned on the basis of mythical stories, for instance, the story of Bhangasvana who refuses to be retransformed into his original male form as he has experienced greater sexual pleasure while being a woman. Even Kunala, an ancient master of erotic arts, is of the opinion that the waning and waxing of moon sexually satisfy a woman more than a man due to her soft and liquid sexuality against a man's hard and dry one. His description of how Women's different body parts become erogenous according to different phases of the moon adds to the myths about women's sexuality. Kunala is also associated with fertility myth for freeing the ancient kingdom of Madarakas from the terrible drought merely by visiting it, as it has been scorching out of the heat produced by abundant ascetic practices. Hariharan has also incorporated the fertility myth that is depicted in Dilshad's tale of 'Rupwati's Breasts':

Chandraprabha stood there .. watching Rupavati planting his bloody ears in the soil .. Rupavati's anger had watered the parched soil so well that the earth pushed up tender ears of corn - row after row. This corn Rupavati cut right away and fed the hungry woman and child. (Hariharan, 2008, p. 187)

In this way, both Kunala and Rupavati germinate crop in a mysteriously miraculous way that corresponds to the fertility myth. In *The Ascetic of Desire*, the pupil recalls an anecdote Malavika has told him about the birth of Buddha which pertains to the religious myth in Bolle's list. Malavika tells the pupil that Lord Buddha is born under a Sal (*Shorea Robusta*) tree as it is depicted in the novel:

On her way to her paternal home for childbirth, Mayadevi, the Enlightened One's mother, rested in a grove of sal trees. As she stretched her hand upward to pluck flowers from a branch, the

baby was born and the tree sheds flowers on the newborn child. (Kakar, 1998, p. 62)

The similar myth has also been embodied in *When Dreams Travel* as the old woman begins to narrate the story of Rupavati to Satyasama, “that the Buddha-to-be was once born as a young woman called Rupavati” (Hariharan, 2008, p. 180). According to Parashkevova (2010), “This story enacts the history of a myth’s journey, with the reader witnessing its successive, creative and ideological metamorphoses from one teller or generation of tellers to the next - all in one setting (p. 90). Thus, Kakar and Hariharan have dealt with the same myth but differently.

The myth of high beings and celestial gods becomes apparent in *The Ascetic of Desire* through Ganadasa’s criticism of Greeks for eating beef, as it is depicted in the novel, “Can you imagine? Eating a cow! The mother of the Rudras, the daughter of Vasu, the sister of Aditya, the womb of immortality, the very goddess of earth!” (Kakar, 1998, p. 87). This particular myth further leads to the myth of Eschatology and Destruction when Ganadasa goes on to describe to the little Malli how beef eating marks the separation of Greeks from their gods and metamorphose them from immortality to mortal beings. The contempt for beef also corresponds to the contemporary Hindu-Muslim tussles and eventual ban on beef in India. The similar myth pertaining to the celestial god Sun is also deftly woven by Kakar in Vatsyayana’s attribution of jasmine flowers to Malavika. The jasmine is mythically believed to have originated out of the ashes of a princess who has fallen in love with the sun god and kills herself after being deserted by the god. “Since the Sun god is the cause of the death of the princess, the tree is unable to bear its sight. It blooms at night and with the first rays of dawn, the white flowers with orange centres drop to the ground” (Kakar, 1998, p. 275).

Sudhir Kakar and Githa Hariharan’s selected novels also demonstrate the myths of fratricide and filicide respectively. Kakar’s reconstruction of fratricide myth is evident in one of the tales recalled by Vatsyayana in which Ramagupta, Samudragupta’s elder son, is being murdered by his younger brother Chandragupta, as Vatsyayana remarks, “I believe the change in the emperor over the years .. has something to do with the guilt of fratricide” (Kakar, 1998, p. 179). The myth of filicide in *When Dreams Travel* becomes apparent in Dunyazad’s tale of ‘Three Scenes and a Father’, as she narrates, “. . . he may be guilty of filicide. .. But who will save him then, the wazir with his first-born’s blood on his hands?” (Hariharan, 2008, p. 174). Hariharan’s incorporation of the filicide myth can be regarded as a symbolic reference to the vicious practice of female-foeticide in the modern times.

The myth of time and eternity is also a common feature of the selected texts. In *The Ascetic of Desire* it has been evinced through Vatsyayana's recalling of the verses his mother use to recite from *Mahabharata*, such as:

Time makes the wind blow with the force of gale,  
Time makes the clouds give rain.

.....

Without its proper time, youth does not come and  
the sown seeds do not sprout. (Kakar, 1998, p. 234)

On the other hand, in *When Dreams Travel* the same myth is indicated through Shahryar's mourning of his wife's death, as he tells Dunyazad, ". . . see what time does to all of God's creatures. Time has not respected your love or mine. It has seized those we loved. Why would this monster leave us untouched?" (Hariharan, 2008, p. 59). Hence, though in different contexts but both writers have deftly woven the myth of time in their concerned novels.

Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex that is based on the myth of King Oedipus is also perceptible in both the selected novels. In *The Ascetic of Desire*, Vatsyayana is the embodiment of Oedipus complex, however, in *When Dreams Travel* it is Umar. The intimate relationship of Vatsyayana with Chandrika marks the presence of Oedipal myth in the novel, as it is evident in the words of Vatsyayana, "When I think it over, I got to touch and hold Chandrika's breasts more than any of her regular customers and occasional lovers" (Kakar, 1998, p. 52). On the other side, Umar's intimacy with his nurse-maid Sabiha is paradigmatic to the myth of Oedipus, as it is depicted in the novel, "Umar's hands flew out of their nest between Sabiha's breasts. Really, they were like old pillows, the cotton stuffing in them all bunched up and lumpy" (Hariharan, 2008, p. 217). The similar influence of the Oedipus Rex on the ancient, as well as the present generation, might be the reason behind both novelists' inclusion of this myth.

The myth of memory and forgetting becomes apparent in *The Ascetic of Desire* through the mysterious letter sent to Avantika by an unknown yogi who claims to help her by averting the forecasted crisis on her family at the behest of his guru whom Avantika has served in her previous life. Following is an excerpt from the letter connoting the myth:

My lady Avantika, you do not know the yogi. He is writing to you on the instructions of his guru. The guru desires the yogi to tell you that you did him a singular service in your previous birth and the time has now come for the guru to repay the debt. (Kakar, 1998, p. 99)

The consideration of Chandrika's infatuation with Mitras as a possession by some spirit and her final liberation from this state by an exorcist in a temple of black-goddess pertains to the deliverance myth in which the god frees his/her devotee from a natural or supernatural power. The pupil during his short stint at his father's profession learns the myth regarding what kind of things are to be offered on different kinds of occasions to the deities. The novel also contains the salacious myth regarding the odours of the female vulva according to which the different eating habits of different kinds of women give their vulva either fragrant or foul odour for mouth congress. Further the myth of Lord Kama's festival brings freedom to a courtesan to choose her lover for the festival's night, and she can even choose more than one lover. Also, the lover is believed to redeem ten times of the sum he gives to a courtesan on the day of the festival.

In Hariharan's novel *When Dreams Travel*, Sultan Shahryar tells Dunyazad about the strange dream of his father he has had while returning from a triumphant battle. In his dream, Shahryar's father sees a woman on whose command he build the city of Shahabad; that corresponds to the creation myth, as it goes in the novel: "'Stay here," she said to him. "Build your city here, a city with a golden palace for its heart"' (Hariharan, 2008, p. 61).

Beside these myths in the novel, there are many mythical tales with symbolic overtones such as the tale of Satya or Satyasama with feminist connotations as it reflects the subjugation and treatment of women as a mere thing or property of King's palace. The myths of the Lonely Voice and the goatherd, Nanni, are also replete with feminist echoes. The tale of Azhar and Mazhar symbolises Qutub Minar and corresponds to the myth of lust for power which is also evident in Shahryar's want to build the highest tower. The myth of reincarnation is perceptible in Rupvata's rebirth as Chandraprabha.

In this way, Kakar deals with the myths pertaining to a certain period of time; however, Githa Hariharan plays a key role in the transportation of myths over centuries with an underneath motive of connecting past with present. "The caravan inches forward over the years. Women, dreams and stories are transported from India to Persia to Arabia to France to England and back to India" (25). Both novels are significant in their dealing with the transportation of myths from one place to another, and from one generation to another; with or without transformations, which is akin to Jung's idea of collective unconscious and archetypes.



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Pratibha  
Spandan