



MYTH IN DEVDUTT PATNAIK'S FICTION: A STUDY

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Abstract:

The paper presents different sorts of retelling and interpretation of myth and mythology given by well-known Indian mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik. He is well-versed in Indian mythologies giving insights about variations in the perception and analysis of Indian mythological stories and Indian culture. He gives logical understanding of every aspect of Indian culture, Gods and Goddesses. His understanding of the subject remains at various dimensions. It is a qualitative research paper following the MLA seventh edition referencing style. MLA eighth edition has been used for referencing and documentation.

Keywords: Mythology, Indian Culture, Tradition, Stories, Dharma, Mythological Women Characters, Religion, Gods and Goddesses, etc.

There have been several contemporary authors who have reinterpreted or retold Indian mythologies with a new perspective. Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik is currently one of the best mythologists of India. His books like *Indian Mythology: Tales, Symbols, and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent*, *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana*, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata*, *Shikhandi: and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You*, *The Girl Who Chose: A New Way of Narrating the Ramayana*, *Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology* and many more, are generally retelling of the stories taken from great Indian epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and several other mythological stories from various different sources.

Retelling is becoming a modern trend in Indian literature. It is basically telling a new version of story in a different way, giving a new perception and often updated. Largely, he retells the story of great Indian epics and in that he tries to bring repressed characters and their viewpoints upfront. He compares, contrasts, analyses, and criticizes these characters in order to reveal much about Indian culture and society from Vedic era to contemporary world. It also examines the treatment of women and culture responsible in framing the human perception, personality and prevailing mind-sets.

He has interpreted a lot about Indian Myths, Indian philosophy, mythological characters, Indian culture and tradition. In *Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology*, Myth according to Devdutt Pattanaik "is essentially a cultural construct, a common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together. This understanding may be religious or secular" (Pattanaik, *Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology* xvi). He examines the Holy Trinity of Hindu mythology Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. He retells many stories associated with these Gods and attempts to find out the 'truth' behind the myths linked the social structure of a society. One can find the bifurcation of the truth about Nature and Culture, Life and Death, Dharma and Adharma in the book.

Everybody lives in myth. This idea disturbs most people. For, conventionally, myth means falsehood. Nobody likes to live in falsehood. Everybody believes they live in truth. But there are many types of truth. Some objective, some subjective. Some logical, some intuitive. Some cultural, some

universal. Some are based on evidence; others depend on faith. Myth is truth that is subjective, intuitive, cultural, and grounded in faith (Pattanaik, *Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology* xv).

In the very beginning of the book Devdutt clarifies that the truth he is talking about is not the superior or even inferior to any other truth. These interpretations are a different understanding of human life. “Ancient Hindu seers knew myth as mithya. They distinguished it from sat. Mithya was truth seen through a frame of reference. Sat was truth independent of any frame of reference” (Pattanaik, *Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology* xvi).

According to him there is nothing like falsehood. There is only complete truth (PurnaSatya) and incomplete truth (Mithya) unlike contemporary understanding of myth as false, he argues and explains myth as subjective truth. It is first a perception given ages ago. With thought comes a perception and with perception one creates a story. That story is complete truth for one but can be incomplete truth for another based on his perception. But none of the perception is incorrect as every perception is built on subjective experience (Pattanaik, *Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology* xv).

Further in the same book he explains fundamental things of Hindu scriptures such as for Hindus there are three worlds i.e. Swarga (Heaven), Bhuloka (Earth), and Patala (Hell). And it is not stiff that Gods reside in Swarga, Lord Vishnu for instance resides beyond the three worlds (Pattanaik, 47-48). Through Yayati’s story Devdutt brings out Indian mind where supporting the older generation and not thinking about gives own happiness is considered very virtuous.

In this book Devdutt searches for the answers related to nature and culture, life and death, perfection and possibility and many such. He retells Indian myths and other Hindu stories in order to logically understand Indian culture, rituals and symbols. ‘If myth is an idea, mythology is the vehicle of that idea. Mythology constitutes of stories, symbols and rituals that make a myth tangible. Stories, symbols and rituals are essentially languages. Languages that are heard, seen and performed. Together they construct the truths of the culture’ (Pattanaik, *Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology* xvi).

He adds to the understanding of the text by giving relevant, diagrams, illustration and commentary. He unravels ancient Hindus myths which frame the Hindu culture and customs. Such as he explains the action of Sita’s abduction by Ravana in following words: “Within there is regard for the law of marriage; without there isn’t any. Within, Sita is Rama’s wife. Outside, she is a woman for the taking. Ravana knows that if he enters Rama’s hut and forces himself on Sita he will be judged by the rules of society. But when he forces himself on Sita outside the Lakshmana-rekha, he will be judged by the laws of the jungle. Within, he will be the villain who disregarded the laws of marriage. Outside, he will be hero, the great trickster” (Pattanaik, 100).

Mythology plays an important role in human life as it gives us the answers to many religious practices and difference between good and evil. Take any mythology; it will basically be the journey of protagonist, who struggles a lot to live an ethical life. As a result, he faces situations where s/he differentiate between good and evil and learns many moral values which towards the end helps him/her to defeat the evil in the story. And towards the end he stands for righteous things which in Hindu mythology are called Dharma. “Manavas, the descendants of Manu, are expected to follow the code of dharma. This code is based on roles and responsibilities. Every creature is bound by duty. This duty bridles desire. It helps in creating a space where even the weakest can thrive.” (Pattanaik, 98)

Stories and myths of a culture influences perceptions and build truths for a society. A culture is constructed by various mythological stories, which gives relevant answers to many cultural practices, traditions, customs, rituals that we follow. It enlightens its readers with relative truth, which is sometimes taken as an absolute truth by its followers. Culture represents the belief system which is built on the mythologies which consist of myths which keeps on changing with the perception of society in which one lives. “A story is basically a plot but narration is the process by which a story is told. The same story sounds different when the storyteller is different. And every storyteller changes his narration depending on the audience. All this makes storytelling rather complex, which is why our view of the world and our truths are also complex” (Pattanaik, 6).

By reinterpreting myths from revered classics and folklores, Devdutt explores the mysterious nature of humans. He clarifies and elucidates on the root cause of traditions and taboo practices in India even today. The persona of Gods and Goddess is both feared and worshipped in India when they are seen as mortal men and women.

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