

The Function of Mythical Consciousness in Indian English Fiction: A Study of Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan

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Abstract

Mythical consciousness plays a vital role in shaping the thematic and narrative framework of Indian English fiction, serving as a bridge between tradition and modernity. This paper examines the function of myth in the works of Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan, highlighting how myth operates as a living mode of perception rather than a static inheritance. Raja Rao employs myth philosophically to interpret nationalism, spiritual identity, and metaphysical truth, particularly through Advaitic concept epic symbolism in *Kanthapura* and *The Serpent and the Rope*. In contrast, R. K. Narayan integrates myth subtly within realistic narratives, using irony and moral symbolism to restore ethical balance in everyday life, as seen in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. Through a comparative analysis, the study demonstrates that mythical consciousness in Indian English fiction functions as a dynamic narrative force that preserves cultural continuity, critiques social injustice, and articulates universal human concerns within contemporary contexts.

Keywords: Mythical consciousness, Indian English fiction, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, myth and modernity, cultural continuity, moral symbolism, nationalism, Advaita Vedanta, realism

Introduction

Mythical consciousness occupies a central and defining position in Indian English fiction, functioning as a cultural, philosophical, and narrative framework through which writers interpret social reality and human experience. In the Indian context, myth is not merely an inherited body of ancient stories preserved in sacred texts or oral traditions; rather, it is a living mode of perception that continues to shape collective memory, ethical values, psychological patterns, and everyday social behavior. Indian English novelists, therefore, employ myth not as decorative folklore or escapist fantasy but as a vital interpretative tool capable of translating history, politics, spirituality, and personal experience into culturally intelligible forms. Unlike Western literary traditions that often separate myth from realism, Indian English fiction integrates myth into the fabric of ordinary life. Myth informs social customs, religious practices, moral judgments, and worldviews. As a result, the Indian novelist draws upon myth to impose coherence and meaning upon the complexities of modern existence. Among the most significant writers to demonstrate this mythic sensibility are Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan. While differing in style, tone, and philosophical emphasis, both writers reveal how mythical consciousness

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mediates reality, transforms lived experience into symbolic meaning, and sustains cultural continuity in a rapidly changing society.

Mythical Consciousness and Cultural Continuity in Indian Thought

Indian myths originate in collective belief rather than empirical history, yet they possess enduring cultural authority. They articulate ethical norms, metaphysical principles, and social structures through symbolic narratives that transcend historical time. Mythical consciousness thus functions as a cultural memory system, preserving philosophical traditions while allowing continuous reinterpretation across generations. In Indian English fiction, myth ensures that social change does not sever ties with spiritual and philosophical roots. Writers employ mythic archetypes drawn from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, Puranas, and regional legends to reflect the cyclical struggle between harmony and disruption, good and evil, restraint and excess. The persistence of these archetypes demonstrates that myth remains an active force in shaping human understanding. Critics such as C. G. Jung and Northrop Frye have argued that myths recur across cultures because they emerge from universal human experiences embedded in the collective unconscious. Indian English writers adapt these universal patterns to indigenous contexts, using myth to address colonial trauma, nationalist aspirations, ethical dilemmas, and metaphysical inquiry. Myth thus becomes a bridge between tradition and modernity, enabling fiction to remain culturally rooted while engaging with contemporary realities.

Raja Rao: Myth as Philosophical and Cultural Framework**Vedantic Foundations and Mythical Consciousness**

Raja Rao's engagement with myth is deeply philosophical and intellectual, shaped primarily by Advaita Vedanta. The Advaitic emphasis on non-duality—the essential oneness of the individual soul (*Atman*) and the Absolute (*Brahman*)—permeates his narrative structures, thematic concerns, and character development. For Raja Rao, myth is not merely a narrative device but a mode of knowing reality. Mythical consciousness in his fiction functions as a cognitive framework through which characters perceive truth, illusion (*maya*), and spiritual transcendence. Myth allows Raja Rao to explore metaphysical questions that lie beyond rational discourse, transforming the novel into a space for philosophical inquiry. His fiction demonstrates that myth is capable of articulating spiritual experience more effectively than abstract philosophy.

Myth and Nationalist Imagination in *Kanthapura*

In *Kanthapura*, mythical consciousness transforms political history into sacred narrative. The Gandhian freedom movement is presented not merely as a political struggle against colonial rule but as a moral and spiritual crusade grounded in mythic imagination. Mahatma Gandhi is

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perceived as an avataric figure, while British colonial power is symbolically equated with epic demons such as Ravana or the serpent Kaliya. By drawing parallels with the *Ramayana* and local folklore, Raja Rao enables rural villagers to comprehend national politics through familiar symbolic patterns. The struggle for independence is thus elevated into a cosmic battle between *dharma* (righteousness) and *adharma* (evil). Mythical consciousness allows villagers to participate actively in the freedom movement without abandoning their traditional worldview. The village of Kanthapura itself acquires mythic significance, resembling the sacred geography of epic narratives. Political resistance becomes a sacred duty rather than a secular act. Myth functions here as a bridge between national history and local consciousness, transforming collective action into a shared cultural experience.

Myth as a Tool of Social Critique in Raja Rao

While myth preserves tradition, Raja Rao does not employ it uncritically. Mythical consciousness in *Kanthapura* also exposes how certain inherited beliefs function as instruments of social oppression. Caste hierarchy and notions of ritual purity—often sanctioned by religious tradition—are revealed as socially constructed myths rather than divine truths. Characters such as Moorthy challenge these beliefs by questioning untouchability and advocating ethical reform. This tension between inherited tradition and moral responsibility highlights myth as a contested space where meaning is continually reinterpreted. Raja Rao demonstrates that myth can be both preservative and transformative, capable of sustaining cultural continuity while enabling social change. The myth of female passivity is also dismantled. Women characters such as Rangamma and Ratna assume leadership roles in the nationalist movement, redefining feminine power in political, moral, and spiritual terms. Myth becomes a site of reinterpretation where marginalized voices reclaim agency without rejecting cultural frameworks.

Myth and Metaphysical Inquiry in *The Serpent and the Rope*

If *Kanthapura* employs myth to interpret collective history, *The Serpent and the Rope* uses myth to explore individual spiritual experience. The novel is structured around the Advaitic metaphor of the serpent and the rope, symbolizing illusion (*maya*) and reality (*Brahman*). This metaphor forms both the thematic and philosophical foundation of the narrative. The protagonist Ramaswamy's spiritual quest reflects the Upanishadic pursuit of self-knowledge. Mythological references to Radha-Krishna, Shiva-Parvati, and Savitri-Satyavan symbolize the relationship between the individual soul and the Absolute. These myths articulate the dissolution of binary oppositions such as self and other, matter and spirit, illusion and truth. Mythical consciousness in the novel functions as a medium for metaphysical introspection. Rather than illustrating doctrine,

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myth expresses lived spiritual experience, transforming fiction into a philosophical exploration of consciousness and identity.

Myth, Narrative Structure, and Non-Linear Time

Raja Rao's mythical consciousness profoundly influences his narrative form and technique. He adopts a Puranic mode of storytelling marked by digression, philosophical meditation, cyclical time, and layered narration, which departs from the linear structure of the conventional Western novel. This narrative strategy reflects an Indian worldview in which reality is understood as multidimensional, fluid, and interconnected rather than sequential and fixed. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, myth operates as a symbolic and philosophical digression, enabling the narrative to move effortlessly across geographical spaces, historical periods, and intellectual traditions. Indian myths rooted in Vedantic thought coexist with references to Western legends and philosophies, creating a dialogue between cultures. This fusion highlights the universality of spiritual experience and suggests that diverse civilizations share common archetypal patterns of human consciousness. Through such a narrative form, Raja Rao transforms the novel into a medium of metaphysical inquiry, where myth becomes an essential tool for exploring truth beyond empirical reality.

R. K. Narayan: Myth as Ethical and Moral Structure**Mythical Consciousness in the Realistic World of Malgudi**

In contrast to Raja Rao's philosophical intensity, R. K. Narayan uses myth in a simple, careful, and realistic way, often with gentle irony. His fictional town of Malgudi gradually acquires a mythic resonance, functioning as a symbolic microcosm of Indian society where commonplace experiences mirror enduring moral patterns. Mythical consciousness in Narayan's fiction operates subtly rather than overtly, guiding ethical interpretation without disturbing the surface realism of the narrative. He does not retell mythological stories directly; instead, he reshapes them through symbolic parallels, understated allusions, and ironic contrasts embedded within ordinary situations. Through this method, myth becomes an implicit moral framework that structures character relationships, social tensions, and narrative outcomes. Ethical order is restored not through divine intervention but through natural consequence and irony. Narayan's restrained use of myth allows readers to recognize the continuity between ancient moral wisdom and modern life, demonstrating how myth continues to inform ethical understanding within the rhythms of everyday existence.

The Man-Eater of Malgudi: Myth and Self-Destruction

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The Man-Eater of Malgudi provides the most striking example of R. K. Narayan's mythic technique. In this novel, Narayan subtly reworks the Bhasmasura myth to examine the destructive nature of unchecked ego and unrestrained power in a modern social context. The character of Vasu represents a contemporary incarnation of the mythic demon—physically dominant, morally arrogant, and indifferent to social, ethical, and natural harmony. His aggressive intrusion into the peaceful life of the printer Nataraj reflects the traditional mythic conflict between destructive forces and sustaining moral order. Importantly, Vasu's end does not result from external punishment or divine intervention but from his own violent impulse. This self-inflicted destruction reenacts the core logic of the Bhasmasura myth, reaffirming the belief that evil inherently contains the seeds of its own downfall. Myth thus operates as an ethical principle that restores moral balance through natural consequence rather than supernatural resolution.

Myth, Everyday Life, and Moral Balance in Narayan

Narayan's mythical consciousness brings the sacred into the sphere of everyday life. Through religious rituals, temple imagery, and symbolic figures such as the temple elephant Kumar, he suggests that spiritual meaning quietly permeates ordinary existence. His characters are not epic heroes but common individuals whose experiences reflect universal moral truths. Resolution in Narayan's fiction is achieved not through dramatic confrontation but through humility, irony, and moral awareness. Myth functions as an underlying ethical force that restores balance through natural consequence rather than heroic action. Far from weakening realism, this mythic sensibility deepens it, allowing Narayan to explore complex moral and philosophical issues through simple, accessible narrative forms.

Comparative Perspective: Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan

Although Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan differ significantly in narrative style, tone, and philosophical emphasis, their use of mythical consciousness reflects a shared commitment to cultural continuity and ethical exploration. Raja Rao approaches myth with intellectual intensity and metaphysical depth, employing it as a means to investigate spiritual identity, national consciousness, and philosophical truth. His narratives often adopt an elevated, reflective tone, drawing upon Vedantic thought and epic symbolism to interpret both individual and collective experience. In contrast, Narayan integrates myth with restraint and irony, allowing it to function quietly within realistic social settings. For him, myth becomes an implicit moral framework that restores balance through everyday action and natural consequence rather than dramatic intervention. Despite these differences, both writers affirm myth as a living cultural force rather than a relic of the past. Their fiction demonstrates that myth can serve multiple functions

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simultaneously—as philosophical inquiry, ethical guide, narrative strategy, and repository of cultural memory. Together, Raja Rao and Narayan illustrate how Indian English fiction negotiates tradition and modernity without cultural disjunction, preserving indigenous worldviews while responding creatively to contemporary realities.

Conclusion

The function of mythical consciousness in Indian English fiction lies in its unique ability to mediate between tradition and modernity, history and imagination, and the individual self and universal truth. Writers such as Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan neither dismiss myth as obsolete nor accept it unquestioningly as inherited belief. Instead, they creatively reinterpret myth as a dynamic narrative force capable of sustaining cultural identity while responding to changing social realities. In Raja Rao's fiction, myth serves as a philosophical and spiritual framework through which metaphysical truth, nationalism, and inner realization are explored. In contrast, Narayan reshapes myth with irony and restraint to critique moral disorder and restore ethical balance within everyday life. Through such reworking, myth becomes an instrument of social critique as well as spiritual insight. By integrating myth with philosophy and lived experience, Indian English fiction attains a distinctive literary voice. Myth thus emerges not as escapist fantasy but as a vital mode of understanding Indian reality, illuminating contemporary dilemmas while remaining deeply rooted in ancient wisdom and collective cultural memory.

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