Revival of myths and folklore in the *Harry Potter Series*

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Abstract : *There have been a number of attempts to demonstrate close affinity between fantasy fictions and myths. Our topic "Revival of Myths and Folklore in Harry Potter" seeks to throw light on mythical and folkloristic elements in the Harry Potter series.*

The common misconception about myths is they are fanciful stories meant for amusement. But myths actually contain moral messages. Myths in general are universal, known as "archetypes". In fact, major thinkers of archetypal literary criticism like Frazer, Carl Jung, and Northrop Frye identify myth with literature and psychology.

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Folklores, on the other hand, are oral narratives in the form of folk tale , folk play, folk magic etc which are handed down orally from generation to generation. Folklores are not only meant for entertainment but have a deeper significance like myths and a psychological aspect too.

In Harry Potter, myths and folklore form an important component. But these have been presented with their faces changed while retaining their essence. J. K. Rowling has moulded many of the mythical stories according to the plot and story of her novels. Not only the significance and moral message of myths have been highlighted, but references to mythical stories and folklores have also been presented such as Cerberus and phoenix from Greek mythology, Boggarts and tale of death from English folklores and many more.

Key words: *Myths, folklore, symbolism, archetypes.*

Introduction :

The word 'Myth' is often misused and misunderstood to mean primitive stories based upon false reasoning. But actually myths are much more than that. Archetypal literary critic Northrop Frye says "mythology as a whole provides a kind of diagram of what literature as a whole is all about, an imaginative survey of the human situation from the beginning to the end, from height to the depth, of what is imaginatively conceivable" (160)

Thus, myths are not common stories. According to critic Alan Watts- " myth is to be defined as a complex of stories-some no doubt fact and some fantasy which for some reason human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meanings of the universe and of human life."(160)

In simple words myths can be defined as traditional, ancient stories dealing with the supernatural and have a religious significance. They seek to explain critical problems which people faced in the ancient times such as the mystery of universe, facts of life and death, etc.

Myths are more than mere stories meant for amusement. Myths contain moral significance. Myths are by nature collective and communal in nature. They bind a tribe or a nation together in common psychological and spiritual aspects. Myths transcend time uniting the past, the present and the future.

Folklore is a wide concept generally consisting of oral narratives, folk magic, music, riddles , proverbs etc. Many folkloristic motifs and themes form a part of Harry Potter. The victory of good over evil, for instance, is a common concept found everywhere. Rituals also form a part of folklores.

Though it is difficult to trace the history of folklores, it is clear that every culture has its own collection of folklores and that its history basically lies in the preservation of prevalent stories at a particular time which today reflect the customs and traditions of that culture. Folklorists like Archer Taylor, George Layman Kittredge nowadays pay more attention to the stories and its effects on readers.(www.uv.es/ebrit/macro-5002-38.9.html#0012)

On a surface level folklores may appear to be something meant for sheer entertainment, but on a deeper analysis we find that folklores hold great significance. The oral narratives especially the cautionary tales serve to instruct and remind members of society of wise codes of conduct. Folklores satisfy the desire of the mortals to transcend the mundane world and enter into colorful world of fairy land and castles. According to Jung, folklore also address psychological issues.(Collected Works, Vol.9)

Objective:

We propose to make a study of the Harry Potter Series with reference to myths and folklores. We aim to trace the various ways in which these myths and folklores have been revived in the Harry Potter Series.

Harry Potter Series:

The Harry Potter series, meant to be read by children, is apparently simple. We have a hero, who is raised as common 'muggle' (non magic population) before he realises that he is actually a wizard and is taken to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He is not just a common wizard at that, but a famous one, who is regarded by others as a saviour, 'the chosen one', who is to fight and save the world from the most powerful dark wizard that ever walked on the earth. Voldemort is so feared by everyone that they call him as "He-who-must-not-be-named" and "You-know-who" (HP and the Sorcerer's Stone, 3). The seven parts of the Harry Potter series is about the journey of Harry as a hero. Apart from fighting Voldemort, Harry must overcome his fears and anxieties leading to a spiritual growth in him.

But what gives *Harry Potter* the capacity to gratify the intellect, is the mythic content in it. In fact, the basic structure of "Harry Potter" is mythic. According to Rafer, a great deal of fun in reading Rowling's book lies in the interpretation of her symbolism : "Although Rowling's books contain a host of influences, the core of the Potter series is inescapably mythic." [3] The mythic element in

'Harry Potter' is drawn from a range of different mythologies which reflects the disjointed, fractured modern cultural experience.

Revival of myths and folklore in Harry Potter Series:

The myths in Harry Potter have been used in various ways-some to inspire awe and wonder and others to impart meaning to the tale. Although the basic idea remains the same, the surface has changed, and thus, the term revival has been used. Some of the different ways in which Rowling has revived myths and folklore are **through archetypes and through symbols.**

Some motifs or themes are universal and found in different mythologies which tend to have a common meaning. They are called **'archetypes'.**

The Hero Archetype: 'The victory of good over evil' is the basic idea on which the moral structure of any mythology is erected. Thus, the hero represents the 'good' who must win over the 'evil' in order to save the kingdom. Jung identifies the three archetypes of a hero : 1.The Quest, 2. Initiation and 3. The sacrificial scapegoat. The initiation most commonly consists of three phases: 1. Separation, 2. Transformation and 3. Return (Guerin et al 166).

Harry Potter's life follows the trajectory similar to many heroes of mythologies from around the world. Harry is born a heroic figure but since 'Choice' is more important than 'Fate' here, he has to prove to be a hero. Constantly trying to overcome his fears and struggling with the 'evil' within him, Harry's life is a continuous process of making the 'right' choices. The 'quest' and the 'initiation' in Harry's life is what the series is all about. Thus, we realize that the myth (the mythical hero) is the structural organizing principle of Rowling's novels.

The Shadow Archetype: According to Jung, the shadow is a structural component of the psyche- the unrecognized dark side of our personality. Voldemort continues to be read most easily as the Jungian archetypal shadow figure (Nikolajeva). Tom Riddle (Voldemort) identifies "the strange likeness between us" and as if to confirm his identity as the Shadow archetype, Voldemort identifies himself as 'Mere shadow and vapour..' (HP and the Sorcerer's Stone, 213)**:**

Symbolism as a literary device is used to impart deeper, often multi-layered meaning to a work of art. There are many kinds of symbols deployed throughout the Potter series including those related to alchemy, the sacred, the numerology, the psychology, gender, power, time and history.

On arriving at Hogwarts, Harry encounters the formal symbols for the Hogwarts Houses of Gryffindor, Slytherin Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff. Even Harry's teachers are 'largely symbolic' (Eccleshare, 24). Thus we have Professor Vector teaching Arithmancy and Professor Pomona Sprout, teaching magical horticulture. Her first name is particularly apt considering that Ovid wrote of Pomona that "no other Latin wood nymph could tend a garden more skillfully'. (328)

Names often symbolize qualities in Rowling's characters, thus Minerva McGonagall's first name 'refers to Minerva, Roman Goddess of wisdom and the arts' (Colbert 172) and Sirius Black's given name reminds us of the 'Dog star in the constellation known as the Great Dog' that had significance in Egyptian mythology for the migration of the soul after death. Nymphadora Tonks, a witch who can change appearances at will reminds one of Nymphadora, a nymph in Greek Myth who could change shape at will.

Rowling creates a metaphor for the mythical, - seeing inevitably brings with it believing, generating both familiarly and explanation, but the mythical is forever out of reach and in a sense without

foundation and untrue. Things that Muggles believe to be mythical or unreal, have either been ignored by them for being 'irrational' (like "Dursley gave himself a little shake and put the cat", who was reading a signboard, "out of his mind" [HP and the Sorcerer's Stone 8]) or have simply been removed from the memory by the wizard ministry. This highlights the inner tensions within myth, since myth can be perceived simply as lies and yet it is also viewed as having the power to 'impart' higher truths. Whilst myth seems to have emerged from human irrationality and primitive modes of thoughts, it also seems to have its own peculiar reality. Thus, the Muggle (non-magic) world and the magic world co-exist. The birth of any witch/wizard is registered with the magic world automatically and a letter of acceptance in the school of magic is sent when the person becomes eleven years old. The witches here, are no more the unpleasant old hag flying on brooms (the folkloristic concept) but as 'normal' as any human being, with special powers, of course.

We shall now trace some of the mythical and folkloristic elements found in 'Harry Potter' series in terms of the origin of a particular mythical element, its original treatment and the way in which they have been revived by Rowling.

Cerberus / Fluffy has originated from Greek Mythology. In Greek mythology, Cerberus, a three headed dog, is the sentry to Hades. The Greek hero Hercules's twelfth and the last labour was to bring Cerberus from Hades. Cerberus in 'Harry Potter' is named Fluffy. It is "a monstrous dog.. it had three heads. Three pairs of rolling, mad eyes, three noses.. three drooling mouths". (HP and the Sorcerer's Stone 128). Fluffy is a guard to the trapdoor leading to the underground chamber where the Philosopher's stone was hidden. In the words of Hagrid, "Fluffy's a piece o' cake if yeh know how to calm him down, jus' play him a bit o' music and he'll go straight off to sleep-" (HP and the Sorcerer's Stone 212).

Boggart has originated from English Folklore. A boggart is a household fairy which causes things to disappear, milk to sour and dogs to go lame. Always malevolent, a boggart will follow its family wherever they flee. In Harry Potter "Boggart is a shape shifter. It can take the shape of whatever it thinks will frighten us most" (HP and the Prisoner of Azkaban, 101) and nobody knows what it really looks like when it is alone. Harry's Boggart takes the shape of a dementor because he fears itself (the fact that Harry was fearful of the dementors was what he feared). In Prisoner of Azkaban, a boggart is 'a symbol of fear itself, and something the hero must overcome (Kern 201).

Phoenix has originated from Egyptian and Greek Mythology. Phoenix has been treated differently in different myths. A phoenix, in general, is a mythical bird with a colourful plumage and a tail of gold and scarlet. A phoenix is born from its ashes. It is said that Phoenix's cry is a beautiful song. A phoenix is a universal symbol of renewal/ rebirth.

In Harry Potter, a few features of phoenix have remained unchanged such as their cry as songs. Fawkes, the phoenix in Harry Potter laments the death of Dumbledore. But Rowling's phoenix is shown to have great strength. Fawkes can carry more than four persons at a time on its wings. Phoenix in Harry Potter is capable of 'Teleportation', i.e. it could teleport at will regardless of the enchantments. Phoenix's tears have been shown to have healing powers. Fawkes's tears heal Harry's injuries which he received while fighting the Basilisk. A phoenix has also been shown to be exceedingly loyal to its owner, Dumbledore.

Dementors belong to a category of Rowling's creations since they retain a nightmarish quality that feeds their mythic power and works to convey otherness even though they exist more fully as psychological archetypes.

As mythic symbols these creations are pulled in different directions, being mainly from the domain of psychology but also striving though their solemnity and archetypal significance to rise beyond this kind of reduction. They are symbols from Rowling's own Potter mythology and drawn from her psyche but such symbols also live in our deeper inherited Jungian "Collective unconscious' (Jung 67). Thus we find sacramental symbolism of phoenix and unicorn alongside deeply psychological symbols such as dementors which for Rowling 'symbolise the debilitating effects of depression' (Kern, 201). However, Dementors are not confined solely to the realms of psychology. The 'Patronus' is a kind of positive force, a projection of the very things.

Dementors feed upon- hope, happiness, the desire to survive but it cannot feel despair, as real humans can, so the Dementors "can't hurt it" (HP and the Prisoner of Azkaban, 176).

There are many more mythical and folkloristic elements revived in Harry Potter. Others included in our research are trolls, basilisk, nagini, the elixir of life, dragons, etc.

James George Frazer, a Scottish social anthropologist, in his work *The Golden Bough*, which is a comparative study of the primitive origin of religion in magic, ritual, and myth, (first published in two volumes in 1890), demonstrates "*the essential similarities of man's chief wants everywhere and at all times"*, particularly as these wants were reflected throughout ancient mythologies. For example Fraser says – "*Under the name of Osiris ,Tammuz, Attis, people of Egypt and western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life…….. in name and detail these rites varied from place to place in substance they were the same"* (325)

Walter Allen says "It was the elements of romance in it that gave even the most realistic of novels its memorability and that a suggestion of the essentially strange, the magical, the fairy tale, however disguised or submerged, is a necessary ingredient of all good fiction." (335)

Conclusion :

It can be concluded, after a detailed analysis of Harry Potter series, that references and influences from all the popular mythologies and folklores reinforce the mythic core of Harry Potter series and make it memorable. David Colbert is right when he says, "Harry Potter novels are literary treasure hunts for (Rowling's) readers. What seem funny sounding names and excursions into fantasies, all have a basis in history, myth or legend."(3)

This not only provides an everlasting appeal to children but also stimulates the adults because whatever is marvellous and exotic always holds our attention. However, though it deals with magic and supernatural elements, the work has a thread of realism running through it. Today the reality is considered to be so absurd or extraordinary that the conventional device of illusionistic realism is considered inadequate to denote it, so, one of the modes through which writers choose to present human experience is pure fiction, or allegory or fantasy or romance and myths.

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