

The Myth of India in History, the American Classroom, and Indian-American Fiction

Dorothy M. Figueira

The present is fractured, it consists of competing pasts. By positing the past as a special case of the present, one not only remakes the present, but creates a new past and redefines identity through an act of memory. The past thus possesses socio-political instrumentality when perceptions of past “history” are made relevant to the present. Conflicts concerning the past are, in fact, struggles suggesting the proper shape that the present should take. In such instances, history may be elevated to myth, when the needs of the present are read into the past and an image of the past is imposed on the present. History, once transformed into myth, becomes an instrument to construct social forms. It shapes the present through an evocation of the past and specific groups that inhabit it.

In this essay, I will discuss how Indian diasporic identity can be studied as a myth. By the term “myth,” I specifically mean a form of discourse which can be employed in the construction or deconstruction of society. I begin by focusing on the initial myth of Indian identity, the discourse concerning Aryans which gave historical value to ancient Indian history, contributing to identitarian politics during the colonial and nationalist periods. The Aryan myth also served ideological interests in the West. The history of India could be appropriated as a means of expressing nineteenth and twentieth-century Western concern with origins. It is my belief that a variation of the Aryan myth has resurfaced in recent years in the form of postcolonial criticism and Indian literary theories of ideal readership and spokespersonship. To examine this supposition I will first investigate how India is constructed today in global academe and how it resonates in current-day “liberatory” theories and pedagogies. I maintain that the current academic construction of India is supported by a diasporic fiction that often provides the key source of documentation available to the American public. We cannot discount the influence of this literature on American readers in general. Nor can we minimize how even the high-brow culture of the university mistakes such diaspora fiction for a true picture of the Indian reality. Understanding any ideology regarding Indian identity, therefore, necessitates a comparative evaluation of this literature. In my conclusion, I will examine the work of several Indian diasporic authors to see how a postmodern Indian identity is fashioned in this body of work.

Myths of Indian Identity

I do not think it is too much of an exaggeration to claim that caste Hindus have always had a high opinion of themselves. While much has been made of colonial mimicry and postcolonial angst, the fact is that under colonialism and certainly during the nationalist period, Indian elites were continuously seeking to reconnect with what they believed to be their idealized Aryan past. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this valorization of Indian identity was text-based. Indians were constructing a vision of themselves based on their reading of Sanskrit canonical sources. One has only to think of a reformer such as Rammohan Roy, whose translations of the Upanishads were composed with the expressed aim of reconnecting Indians to their glorious philosophical past. The Brahma Samaj was established to enable Indians to access a purified form of Hinduism that had supposedly suffered decay under the accumulation of superstitious accretions. While it also sought to reinvigorate Indian religious life with positive values adopted from other religious traditions, the cultural and religious reform of the Brahma Samaj was primarily grounded in the Indian tradition. It was only a matter of reintroducing to the body politic those Aryan values latent in it that had fallen away. A similar desire to retrieve the ideal Aryan past animated the work of Dayanand Saraswati. With the formation of the Arya Samaj, Dayanand sought to rearyanize India by identifying with superior qualities previously attributable to the West but now rediscovered in a fictive Aryan past and derived from his reading of the Vedas. Dayanand's agenda led other reformers, such as Justice Ranade and Lokmanya Tilak, also to allocate lost Aryan strength to the Indian colonial present. What is particularly striking about these stagings of the past is their literary aspect, specifically, their modernism.

In reading Rammohan Roy, Dayanand, Ranade, and Tilak, one is reminded of certain short stories by Jorge Luis Borges, where history is presented as inevitably limited and parochial in focus. Facts are only interpreted according to the ideology of their time, just as memory is activated by conventional scholarly wisdom. History and memory are potentially radically different phenomena than they appear to be. What is remembered or recorded is paltry in comparison to what actually is thought to have taken place. These Indian reformers all believed that the great Aryan race existed, but had been lost or forgotten. Outside recorded history, there was once a Golden Age with mythic Aryan forbears who accomplished astounding feats. The central insight of this mythic reading of the past is that truth is ever elusive and open to reconfiguration. Most importantly, however, myth is seen to hold greater truth value than history. As opposed to history, myth absorbs contradictions into its own system. Myth is thus permitted

to ignore details, since it contains the true spirit of the past and its essential legacy. In other words, the truth of myth is not to be discovered in words, but rather in the lacunae, the message that had been lost through decay, inaccessibility, and the loss of the ability to read correctly. Any analysis of Indian historical or political literature of the nineteenth or twentieth century supports the argument that myth has always influenced India's narratives of identity. The Aryan myth was, perhaps, the most significant myth and it was fully entrenched in the Indian psyche. It bespoke of a glorious past of world-conquering heroes who brought civilization to populations they encountered in their conquests. The Aryans brought to the world a sophisticated culture and laid down the foundations of religion and philosophy.