

Theorizing Mythical Structure: A Case Study of Young Adult Literature

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Introduction:

“... historically, the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic. ... the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, 1977). The last couple of years have witnessed the emergence of a new kind of writing in the subcontinent, classified as Young Adult literature, targeting the segment of young adults aged between 14 and 21 years. Young Adult Fiction is fiction written, published, or marketed to adolescents and young adults, between 12 and 18 years of age. The “fringe” readership may go as low as 10 years at the one end and as high as 20 or more at the other.

There was a time when *Malgudi Days*, Ruskin Bond’s stories or *Amar Chitra Katha* series were considered as foundational in the development of young adult and children’s literature in India. That was, however, way back in the 1970s and 1980s. We have seen the emergence of a vast variety of ‘new writing’ in the form of *chicklit*, graphic novels, detective fiction, pulp fiction, campus fiction and the latest entrant seems to be ‘Young Adult Fiction’ or ‘YA fiction’ as it has come to be known.

The young readers are looking for fresh, intelligent stories where history, mythology and/or societal/political issues are merged with the narrative. The 16-28 age group comprises a very important chunk of readers and whatever the story, it has to have elements and issues that appeal to them. These are usually loaded with easy vocabulary, lots of local references and flavors. As a result, we have seen hundreds of first time authors followed by thousands of young adult readers.

New generation Indian writers have been experimenting with the age old concepts and genre like mythological mysteries of late. And surprisingly it has got a tremendous response from young Indian readers. With the new generation of writers approaching mythology as an entity and a genre, mythology has grown in terms of content and form. Young readers have started identifying with this new-found phenomenon. Writers like Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi, Ashok Banker and many others have popularized this genre in recent years.

These contemporary writers use the mythical framework in its complete form with historical settings, mythical characters and themes. It contains a large frame work of epic narrative within itself. The use of archetypes in literature provokes response from the readers, as the audiences share the intentions of the writers. This sort of writing is said to fall into the category of ‘epic fantasy.’ It is the sub-genre of popular fantasy fiction. The genre ‘epic fantasy’ has been popular for over three decades and is considered to be dominant in the market. Having been influenced by Tolkien, the writers like J.K Rowling and C.S Lewis mastered the genre with audacity.

It is a phenomenon which is supported by publishers as well. Sayoni Basu, who co-founded the publishing house, Duckbill in 2012, says, “YA literature as a category existed since the 1970s, and came into its own internationally in the 1990s. In India, it was only after 2000 that books were specifically published with the ‘YA’ tag.” Meanwhile, international titles, including the Harry Potter, Twilight and Hunger Games series, continued to hold YA readers in thrall.

Another writer Jash Sen, the writer of ‘ *The Wordkeeper’s Trilogy*’ observes:

“In 2009, when I began writing *The Wordkeepers Trilogy* (a mythological YA thriller), many people asked me to ditch mythology and stick to adventure. Until two years ago, the

assumption was to move to ‘proper’ English yet keep the Indianness aside. But that’s changing — YA literature in India is finding a most unique, endearing ‘Indian’ voice. Fewer authors are imitating their Western counterparts. Now, I’d like to see books which nudge issues like sexuality, race and skin colour.”

The young adult category has grown immensely in the last 15 years thanks to the Harry Potter mania that had swept kids and adults off their feet across the world. Books such as the *Twilight*, *Hunger Games*, *Narnia*, *Veronica Roth* series, *Heroes of Olympus* series and *Alex Rider* series have pushed the sales numbers. YA writing by Indian authors are at a nascent stage yet, it is a fairly new genre that is coming up now. Stories from Indian mythology and folk tales, for long the staple of children’s and YA books in India, along with tales of summer-holiday adventure, are now getting added on to by modern mythologies emerging out of speculative fiction, and other newer themes like romance and those inspired by gaming and movies. While it was the foreign authors who bridged the gap between *Panchatantra*, Satyajit Ray’s *Feluda*, Ruskin Bond, R.K. Narayan’s *Swami* and adult fiction, a new crop of authors are staking a claim to shelf space.

Today, the Children and Teen section contributes about 25 per cent of the books category and young adult fiction (age 14 - 21) forms the biggest part of this. A lot of these titles have a huge fan following in India. The demand from the metros is higher. Some of the major topics included in this genre are- interesting twists to mythology, small town young professionals in big town corporate, political enmity, campus love stories, cricket controversies, coming of age tales, women’s issues, funny insider views into industries... the book stores -the real and the virtual- are full of works by Indian authors for young adult readers.

The epic characters that have been immortalized and revered for ages are being interpreted in different ways in popular culture to find resonance with the young readers. The characters are also reinvented

in such a way that their vulnerable side is revealed and the readers identify with their struggles and life. Stories and characters from Indian epics are timeless and will never lose their relevance, according to J. Anjana, who works for a publication house. “There is romance, adventure, individual struggles and epic battles, so retelling the stories of these characters in a modern framework, or revisiting their lives and circumstances, is extremely viable because there’s so much scope for a great story.” she says, emphasizing that Indian fantasy literature will never fade away.

Some prominent examples:

Some major examples in this category can be discussed as under:

In *The Immortals of Meluha* – the first of Amish Tripathi’s *Shiva Trilogy*, Shiva is an ordinary warrior who overcomes his personal demons and challenges to acquire the title of Mahadeva. Reader Suhasini S. says, “The book connected with the masses because it had simple philosophy and its central protagonist Shiva did not have a god-like image, he was more like a common man. It was easier to understand the character and history associated with the period through his struggles and persona, which makes it a very interesting read as well.” Amish Tripathy’s debut work, ‘*The Immortals of Meluha*’, became a surprise bestseller; a re-imagining of Hindu mythology that will ultimately comprise “*The Shiva Trilogy*,” it went on to sell 125,000 copies in 2010, making it one of the top selling fiction titles of the year. It revolves around the character of Lord Shiva, who according to Hindu Mythology is the God of Destruction but here he is portrayed as a hero in all his humanity who is doing things which are very much doable by anyone and everyone.

The book *Palace of Illusions* revisits *the Mahabharata* from Draupadi’s perspective. The author explores her loneliness in her father’s house, her friction with her mother-in-law Kunti and her seemingly inexplicable attraction towards Karna. Sumitra Nair, who works for a woman’s magazine, says, “The book explores Mahabharata

from a woman's point of view. The book had a bit of history and mythology written in a contemporary style. The characters seemed more modern and, therefore, I could connect with them.”

Namita Gokhale's '*Shakuntala*', Ashwin Sanghi's '*Chanakya's Chant*' or David Hair's '*Return of the Ramayana*' series have all explored the ancient classics. The pace of the novels is fast and the language is simple and modern to engage the readers. Apart from books, *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series and animated shows like Roll No. 21 on various mythological characters also entices children to learn more about Indian fantasy literature.

Why mythology?:

As Josephine Angelini, Author of YA Mythology Novel, 'Dreamless' puts it, "it's a combination of things. Everything supernatural is popular right now, and not just in books. There are lots of supernatural movies and TV shows as well, and like vampires, werewolves, ghosts and fairies, Greek mythology is one of the major sources for supernatural lore.”

Another factor that's making Greek myth in particular hot right now is that the Percy Jackson set is growing up. They already know and love mythology, and they are ready for YA books about it. Readers, actually people in general, have always been drawn to myth. *The Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Beowulf* — myth is the oldest and most enduring form of storytelling, and not just in Western culture. China is famous for their dragons. In India there is magic and monsters in their oldest and most beloved tales. No matter where you go around the world in all of the oldest stories, from the Native Americans to the Aborigines in Australia, myth and monsters are everywhere. Heroic storytelling is a common denominator across cultures, and I'm pretty confident that for as long as we tell stories, we will tell tall tales of giants and the little guys that rise up to defeat them. Myth is too awesome not to tell.

Why not yet mainstream literature?

Jojo Joy and Merin Simi rightly raises the questions on the current status as well as the future of Young Adult Literature in India.

1. How do we understand YA fiction in the context of contemporary literary studies which work best within the paradigms and complexities of ‘-isms’ constituted by the postcolonial and postmodern constructs?
2. How do we position YA fiction in the contemporary scenario where there is an increasing demand and need to access literary and cultural products from the insightful perspectives enabled by gender and caste?
3. Is YA fiction representative of the post-Rushdie era where literature is just another cultural artifact that obeys the dictates of the global economy?

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