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Why Myth in Postcolonial Writing?

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Abstract:

The colonization and its impact in many countries in the world have left its indelible marks in all the fields. Though colonizers brought in and introduced new infrastructure, educational policies, economic policies in the colonized countries, they were mainly purported to exploit those countries and its people physically, economically, politically and even religiously. In order to degrade those colonies, the colonial forces cunningly used their missionary education for the gradual uprootment of the natives' identity. To regain what is wiped out and lost, writers from these colonized countries started using their traditional cultural discourses. One among these discourses that they used consciously is myth. This paper is an attempt to justify why these writers used myth and what value it carries along with it. It further highlights Chinua Achebe's typical use of his own native myth in his writings and a few Indian myths which bear the stamp of unique indianness and identity.

Keywords: *Colonization, Myth, Value, Identity.*

Colonization and its effects on Myth:

"..the sounding of the battle-drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself important; and the telling of the story afterwards- each is important in its own way. But if you ask me which of them takes the eagles-feather I will say boldly: the story.....because it is only the story can continue beyond the war and warriors. It is the story that outlines the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into

the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind.”

- Chinua Achebe (Anthills of Savannah, 124)

Myths, folktales, folksongs, riddles, legends and proverbs are the museum of every divergent people and communities' beliefs, social value, identity and guidelines which everyone seek into to lead their lives confidently along with their society. For thousands of years they had been and have been used as safe path through which people of different communities and natives progress their lives safely and harmoniously. Though these forms and discourses are highly revered and valued among the believers, there has been some cynical attitude towards it ever since the entry of colonization and Europeans which left its disastrous impact on these discourses in many once-colonized countries today. The time span of colonization, its ensuing imperialism and the after-effects of these have not only changed many countries geological, economical, political, social condition of the people but even the people's value, culture, tradition, customs and eventually their unique identity. During the time of colonization, the natives were forced to act against their own social system in order to survive. This physical enforcement later due to the long time practice by the natives, encouraged, stimulated, helped and forced them to question their own beliefs, religion, rituals, customs and their social practices passed to us in the form of myths, legends, stories, and proverbs and followed by us from generation immemorial.

The road travelled by India and many African countries during and after the colonization was strikingly similar despite India's freedom struggle and independence which happened earlier than many other African countries. Though the colonization by European was launched solely for the purpose of economic exploitation, the ideological imposition at the later stage of the colonization by them was more severe in African countries than in the Asian due to the predominance of traditions of Orality in most of the indigenous African cultures. The undeveloped and under developed written communication in Africa gave more than enough space and chance for the colonized for the imposition of their culture, value & religion supplanting the native people's traditional value through the missionary education in English. This education of English gradually and eventually diminished the Orality of the African and along with it the people's unique identity.

The European writers, despite the colonized countries' glorious past with its own philosophy, culture, religion, identity and value, had wrongly interpreted and written their works on the peoples' beliefs due to poor and misunderstanding of the nature of the colonized people. To set all those deeply embedded misconception right, many intellectual scholar, educationists and writers from the once colonized countries came forward voluntarily.

Chinua Achebe's use of Myth as counter weapon to decolonize the mind of the people:

Among those, Chinua Achebe of Nigeria in Africa was considered as a pioneer for his typical oeuvre in the field of postcolonial writing who challenged the image of Africa displayed wrongly by the Europeans. He aimed to reject the European's intended attitude towards Africa and its people which were negatively interpreted and propagated during colonization which are still prevail and believed by the world. After reading some atrocious novels on Africa and its people such as Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe realized that he as a true African must do something to show the real image of Africa and show the world that the colonizers were fox. He said:

".....the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else, no matter how gifted or well-intentioned."

He determined to help the third world peoples in regaining their pride, confidence in themselves and their culture, which they lost during the Europeans rule through his writing and speech. He also wanted to inform the world especially the European that Africa was not the uncivilized as it was exhibited by some western writers but it had history, religion, civilization and a set of social rule for harmonious life with nature.

One of the biggest problems that the African writers faced to showcase their real culture, civilization and identity was the choice of language since they lacked well established written formatted language as they were communicating among themselves in spoken language for generations. The entry of the written language, English, was steadily gaining its control over the indigenous people's Orality which concurrently was obliterating it from the people. By 1950's, when the struggle for independence was gaining its moment against the British, most of the first generation African writers selected English language as a counter-weapon to perform psychologically affirmative function and to re-assert their own unique African sensibility and

identity by inscribing new meaning through their oeuvre. They did not produce their works in Standard English but made dynamic changes in the medium to suit their nature sensibility that provided the much needable confidence and inspiration to steady the process of independence. The English used by those writers were called as Young English.

Chinua Achebe, among many writers who endeavored to assert their civilization, identity and cultural value in the postcolonial period, has truly been an outstanding model for many contemporarians and progenies, who realized and successfully demonstrated the potential essentiality of using his indigenous myths, folksongs, folktales and proverbs in English to Africanize the language.

When most of the writers adapt themselves to English, Achebe remained as an exemplar and proved that indigenous values such as myth, folktales, folksong, proverbs, riddles, customs and rituals could survive in the form of Orality even after centuries without losing its original vigor.

Throughout his career as a writer, he strongly believed that in order to keep one's unique identity in the world each community should preserve and follow its original culture with some epistemological dynamism according to the time to survive. He vehemently used the myth, folktales, folksongs and proverbs not just for the rhetorical purpose but to show the world that these are the real identity and cultural representative of his own community. Achebe has not only used these form to express his opinion and rhetorical skills but also showed his people's identity and civilization by bringing back the traditional tales and myths with new vigor and meaning though the medium of English to suit to the modern world. Achebe has shown the world how to use the colonizer's language effectively as counter weapon against the established colonial legacy in his country. Though it was thought to be impossible to transfer one's native sensibility into a foreign language, he conquered the thought and succeeded in transferring his native values, sensibility and Orality into English without losing its nature and meaning. All his works include proverbs, adages, folktales, myths, legends, traditions, customs, politics, economic conditions and the native's life style and various details that were once inextricable among his people.

Achebe strongly believed that every native and nation has its own myth, folktales, legends, traditions and value. This paper is an attempt to showcase how these forms plays

significant role in the people's life not just as a part of rhetoric and in conversation but as an inseparable part of people to expose their true identity, value, tradition and culture.

Hidden value and identity of people in Myth:

Under this persistent period of post-colonialism the word myth and words pertinent to it is never going to be treated as rhetorical expression among the scholars, intellectuals and educationists. In fact myth is not a mere expression or stories but inanimate guider to the people who have it and believe in it. Myth is defined as one story in mythology and a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular group which served to provide a rationale for social customs and observation, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Even today it presents the essential guidance for proper living.

Some scientist and rationalists believe that myths are stories invented to play the role of science in the earliest stage of human development when they were not properly civilized. Further they opine that due to the development of science and technological improvement, those outdated stories are meaningless to be believed and followed. But even the modern science has some own myth, threaten and expose the barrenness in science which is remained inexplicable. Plato in the fourth century B.C said:

“Myth is possible beyond certain scientific knowledge”

This shows that myth and science are not the same but different so to be approached in different perspectives, i.e. science with analytical and intellectual skills and myths with spiritual as deals with life rather materials and equipment.

In fact, myth has been playing the role of torch bearer and light house in the modern scientific world in which human race has lost their value and identity. Myths render the modern world the much needable spiritual significant by reconnecting the people through believe by playing classical purpose of bringing man in union with the whole society whose identity is best defined in the body of society.

Myth even when approached for the scientific point of view possesses some scientific truth woven into a tale. For example when we look into some of the myths and customs that we,

as Indian, follow for many generations, we could find the hidden life treasure in it. For that a few traditionally followed myths and customs are given with its hidden scientific explanation.

– Joining Both Palms Together To Greet.

People greet each other by joining their palms called “Namaskar.” The general reason behind this tradition is that greeting by joining both the palms means respect. However, scientifically speaking, joining both hands ensures joining the tips of all the fingers together which pressure points of eyes, ears, and mind. Pressing them together is said to activate the pressure points which helps us remember that person for a long time.

– Why Do Indian Women Wear Toe Ring,

Wearing toe rings is not just the significance of married women but there is science behind it. Normally toe rings are worn on the second toe. A particular nerve from the second toe connects the uterus and passes to heart. Wearing toe ring on this finger strengthens the uterus. It will keep it healthy by regulating the blood flow to it and menstrual cycle will be regularized. As Silver is a good conductor, it also absorbs polar energies from the earth and passes it to the body.

– Why Married Women Apply Sindoor Or Vermillion.

The application of sindoor by married women carries a physiological significance. Sindoor is prepared by mixing turmeric-lime and the metal mercury. Due to its intrinsic properties, mercury, besides controlling blood pressure also activates sexual drive. This also explains why Sindoor is prohibited for the widows. For best results, Sindoor should be applied right upto the pituitary gland where all our feelings are centered. Mercury is also known for removing stress and strain.

As such all the myths and customs like *The Idol Worship, keeping Bell in the temples, start with spice and end with sweet in eating, applying Mehendi* have valuable reason and science which were passed to us by our ancestors. Likewise every myth and custom has its own hidden meaning and science for the happy living which are transformed in the form of myths, stories, folksong, customs, rituals and legends. Whereas science and scientists perplex and blink to explain some of the myths surround our life today like:

- Science could not find out and explain the origin of the first living creature in the earth.
- Science could not explain what telepathy and how does it work.
- Science is not able to reason out the Extra-sensory perception.

So there are a lot that is beyond science. These myths are created with purpose by our ancestors in time immemorial. So the key difference between science and myth is that myths are not testable, whereas science is designed to be tested. Science depends on collective and regularly updated knowledge, whereas myth is based on passed down stories and beliefs. Myths may change over time, particularly after its contact with other cultures, but they do not change and adapt to new periods and technological developments in the same way science does. Myths may be performed through rituals and beliefs but they usually do not have physical effects in the real world, as science and technology do.

Structural anthropologist Lévi-Strauss too emphasizes on the importance of myths. He says:

“mythical thought always works from the awareness of oppositions towards their progressive mediation. The symbolic mediation in myths offers inspiration for culture and culture members to heal, flourish, or accept their reality”.

But in modern age, these myths are looked at as outdated science and valueless discourses especially after the entry of European in the enforced form of colonization through their missionary educations. During the colonization, the European not only tried to exploit our natural resources but even the tradition, customs, culture and social value by forcing us to doubt and question us against what we traditionally believed and followed. We, as modern men in the postcolonial period, are searching our true identity and social value holding the westerner’s torch in our hands.

Myth is not merely a story but a reality lived. It is not a fiction like we read a novel but it is a living reality, believed to have once happened in primeval times, and continuing forever to influence the world and human destinies. So the limitation to the study of myth to the mere examination as text has been fatal to a proper understanding of its nature. Myths have come to us from our ancestors without any negative comments, doubts and any added flavor for the rhetorical purpose through these past generations. Myths were created not for the scientific explanation or satisfaction of the people but to guide the people who were devoid of moral, religious, scientific and practical wisdom. Myth fulfilled and fulfills its indispensable duty of

guiding, expressing, enhancing people's beliefs to have harmony with nature, another human and with society. It safeguards and enforces morality and carries the practical wisdom for the guidance of people. Myth are, as a few European, intellectual and scientists proclaim, neither story nor just rhetoric but a highly pragmatic chanter of faith and moral wisdom to be believed, preserved and followed by its own people to live in harmony and keep their identity.

Today it is easier to write down myth as fiction than to observe its complex ways in which it enters into life or to study its function by the observation of the vast social and cultural realities into which it enters. And this is the reason why we know so many texts but so little about the very nature of our own myth. So myth, of every country and community, carry the stamps of its people's value, culture, religious and identity and that is the reason why postcolonial writers want to recreate and include their myth in their writing to reveal their unique identity in the world.

Hans Blumenberg, German philosopher, too proposed that:

“The function of myth is to help human being cope with the inability of given reality, a need that is not outmoded by scientific advances and rationality”.

These writers' use of myths, Legends and folktales are an effort at de-contamination, a process of freeing their culture from colonization pervasive influence. These national and native discourses are used to gain a measure of self affirmative and nationality.

Knowing the value of myths a number of modern writer in the postcolonial period started using their myths in their writing to prove their real identity and culture as a nationalist. For example

- Wole Soyinka used his Yoruba myth in his *The Lion and the jewel*.
- Chinua Achebe used his Igbo myth in his novels like *Things fall Apart, No Large at Ease, Arrowr of God, Man of the People* and in other works.
- R. K. Narayan too used the Indian myth in his *Ramayana*.
- Raja Rao used the Indian myth in his *Kanthapura* and *The Serpent and the Rope*.
- Amy Tan used the Chinese cosmology and myth in his *The Joy luck Club*.
- Ama Ata Aidoo used her Ahamian myth and folktale in her play *Anowa*.

- Ben okis used her Nigerian myth in her *The Famished Road*.

Conclusion:

Myths, legends & folktales are neither just fiction nor created for the rhetorical purpose to make our conversation more interesting. If so, educationists, scholars, linguistics and intellectuals could have invented and innovated so many myths, legends and folktales in the recent past to make their languages more attractive and developed. But these discourses were created by our ancestors even before language came into existence in the form of tales, customs, rituals and celebration to give its people unique identity from other nations and communities to lead their live in harmony with nature, and society. These were, with serious intention, passed to us by our ancestors to keep our society in union with its member and show to the world one's true cultural identity. Since each one has his own native, national and community myth, legends, folktales and customs, they should be preserved and be passed to his progeny to save them from moral and identity crisis which many colonial countries experience today.

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