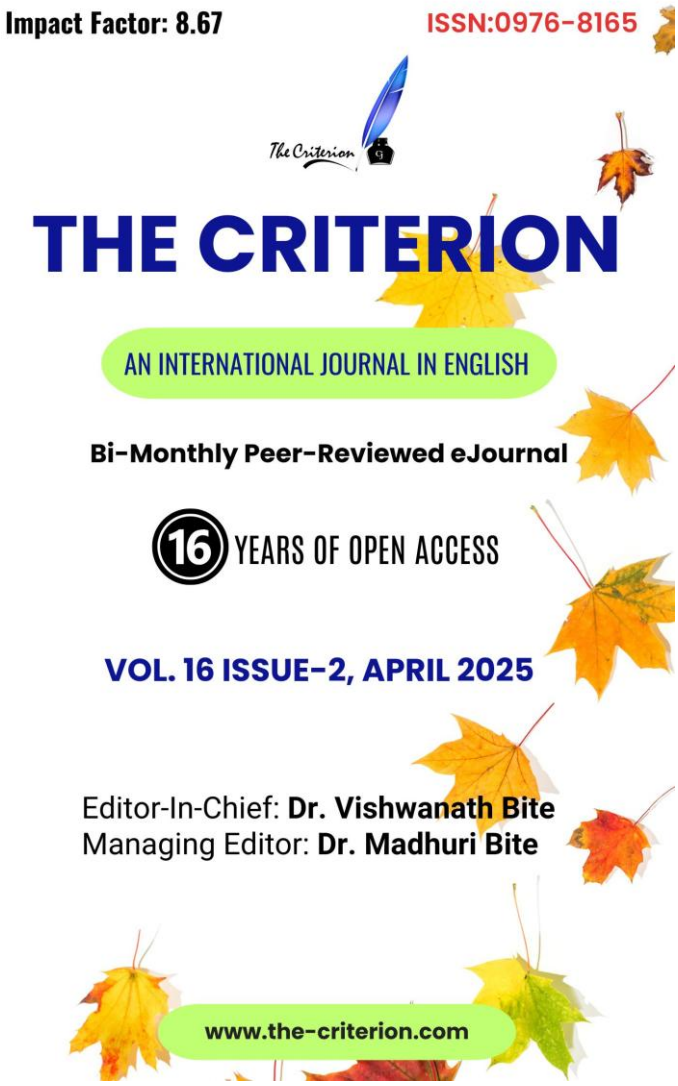

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Indian English Literature: Pluralism of Myths, Legends, Memories and Sustainability

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Abstract:

Literature has always reflected society and it is well accepted as a mirror of the society. Literature replicates, recreates and reproduces the socio-cultural, socio-economic and also the socio-linguistic conditions of the society. Memories, thoughts, emotions and beliefs of any particular individual or any particular community or a society that diverse people with different cultural and religious orientations inhabit are captured and fictionalised in various literary works. India, a multicultural and multi-religious country has created diverse views and beliefs and has been leaving its footprints in a way of literary pluralism. Literary pluralism here means diverse literary genre be it poetry, fiction, short stories or drama. Literary works dealing with myths and legends have always been found to trace back towards individual roots of the past. Mythology may be taken as most ancient root in the origin of literary work. Myth has been a cultural resource where people actively re-engage and re-involve and has been the ground where literary works, based on myths and memories thrived. The application of myths and legends in Indian English literature have gained multiple significance in a diverse spectrum of religious, cultural, dalit persecutions, and other forms through the amalgamation of memories of people of different socio-cultural backgrounds. It

is quite explicit that the Indian English writers are deeply weave their past heritage with the contemporaneity of the women's position in the society and their works draw sustenance from the rich cultural heritage and mythology of the past. The Indian English writers weave mythology with the contemporary issues in order to modernize the past, give new shape to the present and de-contextualize the present. This paper explores how Indian English literature navigates this intricate relationship, focusing on Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* (1988), Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), and Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019). Drawing upon ecocritical frameworks and the concept of mythopoeic imagination, the analysis reveals how these literary works critique unsustainable development practices, champion the voices of marginalized and silenced voices, and envision an alternative sustainable future that prioritizes ecological well-being along with human progress and environmental development. This paper argues that Indian English literature plays a vital role in raising awareness, fostering critical dialogues and discourses, and ultimately contributing to a vision of a sustainable future that prioritizes both societal and environmental responsibility and prosperity through mythic orientation, legendary connections and memories.

Keywords: Myths, legends, memories, Indian English literature, pluralism, sustainable development.

Introduction:

B. Das has shared his opinion on myth, saying, "Myth is a statement of primeval reality which still lives in present- day- life and, as a justification by precedent, supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, a sociological order and magical belief. It is, therefore, neither a mere narrative, nor an explanatory tale. It fulfils a function and the continuity of culture, with the relation, closely connected with the nature between age and youth, and with

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human attitude towards the past. The function of myth is, briefly, to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige of tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events" (244).

Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* (1988):

Girish Karnad's two-act play, *Nagamandala* (1988) published in 1988 was originally a Kannada play. It was based on a Kannada folklore blended with history, memory and mythology. The title of the play bears connotations with the symbolic suggestions of snake as a fertility symbol that sustains life on earth. The title of Girish Karnad's play, *Nagamandala* means 'a play with a cobra'. It also means 'coiled snakes' and is connected to a religious festival observed in the coastal region of Karnataka which is celebrated in order to propitiate Serpent gods. Nagamandala, the worship of serpent god, is a religious and cultural event in south Kannada. In the south Indian villages there is a practice among women to pour milk on ant- hill occupied by cobras ritualistically on a certain day in a year i.e. 'Naga- panchami' the fourth day and the fifth day of the waxing period of the moon. However, in Karnad's play, Nagamandala is transformed into a metaphor of the married woman, Rani whose husband, Appanna frequents a mistress and dejects her. The play, *Nagamandala* reveals the position of women in society, constraints of traditional marriage, and the patriarchal norms that marginalizes women through the incorporation of mythical elements in it. Rani's relationship with the cobra symbolizes her rebellion with these societal norms and ultimately marks her liberation, release and victory.

Through the mythic mould, Karnard seeks to present the condition of an Indian woman, Rani who desperately tries to win the affection of her husband who practices open infidelity and cruelty towards his wife. Kurudavva who gives her two charmed roots for winning the heart of her husband by making him consume the roots, tries to save Rani. However, Rani spills it

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on a nearby ant-hill where a snake living in the ant-hill instantly falls in love with Rani. The snake in the myth is believed to be a symbol of fertility. The snake takes the shape of Appanna and has sexual communion with Rani. It is through the snake that Rani understands the meaning and passion of love in marital life.

According to Indian tradition, the snake is an accepted image of vital energy of the cosmos that symbolizes fertility and the process of sustainability on earth. So, Rani, the protagonist of the play symbolically shows her emotional relationship with cobra by letting it live happily in her abundant hair. This signifies her vital energy as well as her conscious level being aroused after her sexual awakening. Thus, the play Nagamandala, when viewed from the philosophical and mythological point of view, the cobra has given her a chance to choose and achieve liberation and it causes Rani's integration at different levels, - the physical, the emotional, the spiritual and the intellectual.

Man-Woman intimate relationships, the question of chastity being imposed on married women while their husbands cheated on their wives and carried out illicit relationship with other women outside their wedlock, married women's earnest desire for the love of their husbands in spite of the shortcomings of their husbands, the throbbing of secret love that Naga demonstrates by his killing himself on the passionate and warm body of Rani, and, above all, the result of the sexual communion being a male child, the 'son' lighting funeral pyre and so many other potent and hidden meanings, make this play resonate with the pulse of deprived women of all ages. The son lighting the funeral pyre suggests beginning of new life and discarding of the old. The son is the genetic continuity of the parents and thus sustains the genetic continuity of the family. The gene continues and so the life continues, similarly the generations continue and myths, memories and legends pass down the ages from person to person.

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Aquatic or terrestrial, snakes in myth display an extraordinary range, such as fertility in the case of the Indian snake groves, joining tree and serpent as fertility symbols are often famed for aiding barren women to conceive, and secondly, for the healing purpose as the entwined snakes of the caduceus are still the world's best- known symbol of the healing arts. Snake as a symbol of fertility, appears in various myths and legends, and passes down across generations, and thus creates a continuous chain of memory in the future ages to come.

Raja Rao's novel *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960):

Raja Rao's novel *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) blends philosophical discourse with myths and folk-narratives. It is mainly autobiographical in nature where mythology is esoteric, symbolic and emblematic. This novel won him the Sahiyta Akademi Award in 1964 and Padma Bhushan award in 1969 and a wide critical appreciation for his creative literary output and achievement.

Legends, myths, folk wisdom and memories are so well blended as to reveal a basic unity and organic conception of the novel. The hero Ramaswamy's sensibility absorbs astonishingly the myths and legends of different civilizations and integrates the past and the present into the essential oneness of history. Thus, he sees no difference between the Ganges and the Seine; George VI and the Indian Bharata of the Ramayana, 'for both of them believed in the impersonality of monarchy': "The king can do no wrong" just like Bharata's establishing a duality in himself by apologizing for being a king because after an apology he is no more a king but his agent only (p. 204). He also equates Gandhi with Bhishma of the Mahabharata while explaining martyrdom. Likewise, he universalises 'matrishakti' by making the 'purush' manifest through 'prakriti' and by showing Queen Elizabeth II as the feminine principle that makes the universe move. "To Mitra she is Varuna, to Indra she is Agni, to Rama she is Sita, to Krishna she is Radha". (pp. 357-365)

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In Indian tradition, “the serpent” and “the rope” are symbols of telling the difference, and Rao hopes to integrate his views about “illusion” and “truth” into his narrative. The protagonist of the novel, Ramaswamy says “The serpent or the rope… the universe is either illusory or real”.

The present research article critically analyses Raja Rao's novel *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) in the light of Advaita Vedānta, a non-dualistic sub-school of Vedānta in the Hindu philosophical tradition, which insists that the transient individual self is identical to the eternal Absolute- self which, in turn, is the essence of existence. The true nature of existence is sat-chit-ānanda or truth, consciousness and bliss. *The Serpent and the Rope*, published in 1960, narrates the story of Ramaswamy, a young South Indian Brahmin who pursues his doctoral studies in France on the history of the Albigensian heresy. While in France, Ramaswamy marries Madeleine Roussellin, a French lecturer specialising in history. However, the marriage falls apart due to Ramaswamy's infidelity and a lack of understanding between the two. The cause of their incompatibility is not solely the presence of psychological disparities but rather their diametrically opposite cultural sensibilities. The narrative reveals multiple meanings as the reader is left reflecting and introspecting. This research article contributes to the existing scholarship on Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* by contextualising the novel within the philosophical framework of the Advaita Vedānta, a school of ancient Indian philosophy. By doing so, this study illuminates how the novel comments on complex philosophical ideas such as the nature of reality and the nature of self, alongside re-evaluating societal norms that perpetuate differences within the culture. The research also attempts a nuanced, comprehensive understanding of the novel's significance as a work of literature as well as a philosophical treatise.

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The Serpent and the Rope is the most prominent literary work that came into existence with the maturity of Raja Rao. This spiritual and philosophical autobiography of the novelist containing metaphysical undertone running parallel throughout the novel makes this novel a rich tapestry of myriad memories that associate with disruption, disintegration and spiritual bankruptcy of man-woman relationships. The novel, *The Serpent and the Rope* is thus based on spiritual sustainability that is woven within the texture of legends, myths and memories.

Myth emerges from collective unconscious of mankind. Rama and Savithri are contemporary prototypes of archetypal Prakrati and Purusa, Krishna and Radha, Shiva and Parvati because their experience of love is akin to that of their original archetypal figures. Nagrajan has remarked: "Man is Purusa, the lord of creation and woman is Prakrati, the inherent power of Purusa, whereby Purusa creates. Woman's function is to give herself as Prakrati to man as Purusa so that man may know that is his true self is Purusa himself (80). The mutual interdependence of man and woman and the perpetuation of life on earth help the earth to sustain life.

Amitav Ghosh's novel, *Gun Island* (2019):

Amitav Ghosh weaves the myth of the Gun Merchant into contemporary weather-related realities such as the Los Angeles wildfires, the unusual travels of dolphins and spiders, and the sinking buildings of Venice, to create a mythic, absurdist, and ultimately hopeful tale of our contemporary times. In Amitav Ghosh's novel, *Gun Island* (2019), Dinanath Datta called "Deen" is an Indian rare books dealer of Bangladeshi descent, who lives and works in New York. One winter, he visits Kolkata. Kolkata is the city in India to which his family migrated after Partition. During his stay in Kolkata, he hears of an old Bengali folk legend about Bonduki Sadagar, the Gun Merchant who was forced to flee abroad to escape the wrath of

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Manasa Devi, the goddess of serpents. Deen's distant aunt, Nilima Bose, asks him to visit the shrine connected to the legend to help preserve the story.

Though Amitav Ghosh's historical fiction, *Gun Island* (2019) begins in Kolkata, the plot shifts to Sundarban since Deen Datta is sparked by a visit to the Sundarbans. In the religious narratives of the Sundarbans nature is depicted as a complex and ambivalent force in the dual personified figures of the fertile mother Bon Bibi and the malevolent demon Dokkhin Rai. Bon Bibi is depicted as "Mother of the earth" who "gave [Dukhey] reassurance" with "words of kindness" (Ghosh 357). Bon Bibi represented the nurturing, benevolent aspects of nature and its capacity to sustain life. Even as Bon Bibi stood as "the forest's protectress" (354) and "took [Dukhey] in her lap with a gentle caress" (359), she also embodied the epitome of domestic sustenance: the feast that she summoned for Dukhey was described as "so fine, so ambrosial, that some began to say it was hardly credible" (357). In contrast to Bon Bibi's generosity, Dokkhin Rai is portrayed as a taker rather than giver of life. He is characterised by his "devil's desires" and "appetites" for human flesh, as embodied in his chosen avatar of the tiger (359). The demon's "appetites" are notably described as threatening natural phenomena: "like a flood in spate" and "that vast maw" (359). Together with his guise as a tiger, these phrases personify the threatening and consumptive aspects of the mangroves in the figure of the "deva". In short, the Dukhey narrative suggests that nature is its own double. Nature is best understood as embodying multifaceted contradictions at once: deity and demon, nurturance and threat, benevolence and malevolence, life and death, and the consumption of "rice" and "salaan," but also of "human flesh" (357, 359).

Local mythic narratives allow human beings to examine both the nurturing and violent aspects of nature in two distinct personifications of the landscape of the Sundarbans. As Wallace writes, Dukhey's tale thereby "help[s] make sense of an often confusing, sometimes frightening physical world" (8). Yet, this sense of confusion is perhaps not resolved by

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Dukhey's tale; nature in *Gun Island*, as examined through the lenses of myth, retains a perplexing ambivalence. Even seemingly one-dimensional, archetypal characters like the benevolent mother and malevolent demon are rendered multi-dimensional; both are depicted as sharing similarities although they are different. Thus, the myths of the Sundarbans further highlight nature's complexity beyond a mere set of binaristic divisions. For example, Kusum's prayers to Bon Bibi go unanswered when she fails to protect Kusum's father. Although Kusum "never once stopped reciting Bon Bibi's name" as the tiger stalks her father, he is still ultimately killed (109). Kusum's epithet for Bon Bibi—the "Mother of Mercy"—thus becomes darkly ironic when contrasted with the vividly violent description of her father's death: "she heard the sound of his bones cracking as the animal swiped a paw across his neck; she heard the rustle of the mangrove as the animal dragged the corpse into the forest" (109). Although Dukhey is guarded and saved, Kusum's father is not, dying in the enactment of a real-life parallel to Dukhey's story. Horen also informs Kusum that Bon Bibi "chooses to call those who are closest to her" (109). Here, the word "closest" embodies both the intimacy of the Mother's embrace, as well as the fact that obeying the "call" and stepping into Bon Bibi's otherworldly realm is also an act of relinquishing one's life. The Mother of Mercy, then, does not just embody the embrace of life, but also that of the afterlife, taking away life just as easily as she offers it.

Just as Bon Bibi defies the nurturing Mother archetype when she cannot (or chooses not to) protect everybody, Dokkhin Rai also offers up a natural bounty of his own, arguably in a direct parallel to Bon Bibi's feast. On the one hand, Dokkhin Rai's "bees began to swarm" like "a demon host" or "army" that "came flying, raising a storm" as they "numbered in *lahks*" (355, 356). The frightening and violent metaphors used to describe the bees again associate the demon with an image of nature as a deadly threat. Yet, Dokkhin Rai's bees are also emblematic of nature's wealth. Just as Bon Bibi summons a feast for Dukhey, the bees

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"load [Dhona's] boats within the hour . . . full to the brim, every single one" with honey (356). Similarly, they offer "a rich load of wax" to Dhona, who then pours honey into the river, wherein "the brackish tides turned sweet and mellow": an incongruously saccharine description when associated with the fearsome Dokkhin Rai (356). When Bon Bibi's "call" is associated with death and violence, just as Dokkhin Rai harnesses the Sundarban's natural riches to reward Dhona, the two mythic faces of nature are further rendered complex.

Gun Island presents a potential symbiotic relation between myth and scientific discourses. Both episteme are interwoven by Amitav Ghosh to create a new mythical narrative voice that bridges these two modes of meaning-making, encouraging both humility and appreciation in the face of natural phenomena. Amitav Ghosh like Nirmal narrates this tale of misery in his book, which is a unique account of suffering and agony where myth, reality and memory combine to create a flawless concept of the benevolence and wrath of nature.

From its origins as rudimentary religious narrative to its more recent modifications as a tool for studying the unconscious mind, memory and legend, myth has always played a vital role in human psychology, human history and social history. Amitav Ghosh, through his works cautions the present generation that many cities and places have been engulfed in a rapidly changing world with a sea level, and that, it is time to find new forms of art and literary works that disclose the predicament at hand. *Gun Island* reminds us that we are going through a man-made existential crisis that threatens one's own existence and that of other living organisms. The novel warns us not to be a bait to 'greed'. Mankind's desire to conquer is bringing far reaching undesirable changes in the climate which are detrimental to human beings as well as other living organisms.

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