



A barthesian critique of mohammad hanif's novel *a case of exploding mangoes*

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Abstract

This research paper analyses how Muhammad Hanif in his novel, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, deconstructs the social myths about General Zia and history in Pakistan. People believe that Zia was a savior, a hero in the history of Pakistan. This paper studies that Mohammad Hanif, in his best-selling work, exposes General Zia as an exploiter, an opportunist, and a deceiver. This article investigates how Mohammad Hanif breaks up the fabricated beliefs of people about the history of Pakistan. It is significant because it exposes the special trick of myth to present fabrication and a set of values as if it were a natural condition of the world. The purpose of the study is to find how *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* unmasks General Zia's machinations to inculcate ideologies in the minds of people. The novel exposes that General Zia was behind the fabrication of Myths about justice, Islamization, morality, protection, and integrity. In order to analyze the text, the researcher applies Roland Barthes's concepts of myth or ideology in his essay, *Myth Today*. Barthes argues that myth helps to naturalize a particular world view. He further reveals myth is based on context and by changing context the effects of myth can be changed. The findings of this research suggest that the historical beliefs of people about Zia are myths, and myth doesn't occur naturally.

Keywords: myth, fabrication, justice, religion, islamization

Introduction

Mohammad Hanif is one of the best Pakistani novelists writing in English. His fiction has been directly influenced by popular Punjabi culture and explores how a human self negates with the institution of the state and religion in contemporary Pakistan. Through his seemingly ordinary characters, Hanif provides immediately relevant social and political commentaries, interspersed with witty repartee, which not only keeps the narrative fresh and the reader glued but also provides valuable insights into the complex cultural milieu of present day-Pakistan. Hanif's novels are extraordinarily popular in the sub-continent and have been translated into more than sixteen languages. His fiction is compared to that of Salman Rushdie, Saadat Hassan Manto, and Joseph Heller. He has two novels: *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* and *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. The particular novel which researcher is going to study is *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. This novel was published in 2009 India by Random House India. Till now, over 50,000 copies of this novel have been sold.

By writing this novel, Mohammad Hanif becomes the winner of the Shakti Bhatt First Book Prize Shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award Longlisted for the Booker Prize. Paying a just tribute to Hanif's present work, Kamila Shamsie writes a famous line: "one of the most exciting novels I've read in a long time". *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* is set in Pakistan. It is all about the incident happened in 1988. In August 1988, President Zia Ul-Haq gets into the presidential plane; Pak One, and it explodes midway. The novel revolves around two characters: Zia Ul-Haq and Ali Shigri, a junior officer at the military academy. By portraying these two characters, Hanif deconstructs the constructed myths. One of these two characters constructs the myths and second being a narrator of the story deconstructs myths. Zia Ul-Haq

builds myths and makes his people believe that he is their savior, but Hanif through his second character Ali Shigri reveals that Zia is not the savior of the nation but robbers and exploiter.

The theory which is going to be applied has been taken from the Roland Barthes concept of Myth Today. Roland Gerard Barthes was a French literary theorist, philosopher, linguist, critic, and semiotician. He was born on 12 November 1915 and died on 26 March 1980. Barthes' ideas explored a diverse range of fields and he influenced the development of schools of theory including Structuralism, Semiotics, Social Theory, and Post-Structuralism. In his theory of Myth Today, he argues myth is a special type of speech. A special type of speech means a special trick of myth to present an ideology or set values as if it were a natural condition of the world, but it is no more than a man-made perspective. Myth is not a natural truth, but it is a constructed truth which helps the speaker to get power over his audience. By using myth, a storyteller puts a specific ideology in the minds of his audience in order to fulfill his own purpose. The same happens in the novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. In this novel, Zia inculcates the wrong ideologies in the minds of people by constructing his own myths of justice, morality, Islamization, equality, personal integrity, and fortification.

Problem Statement

Most of the people study *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* by Muhammad Hanif as a representation of Zia's praetorianism and a historical novel. However, they are failed to analyze it from the perspective of deconstruction of myth. Muhammad Hanif breaks up the traditional beliefs of the people about Zia in this novel. In fact, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* is shattering of constructed reality and it saves to naturalize a particular world view.

Research Questions

- How does Mohammad Hanif deconstruct the myth of Zia as a savior in his novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*?
- What kind of ideology Zia inculcates in the minds of his people in order to rule over them in the novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*?
- What is the role of context in making Zia as a hero of the nation?
- In what way Zia exploits his people by naturalizing his own integrity as a person and by giving them a false concept of justice and morality?

Objectives

- The purpose of this study is to find how Mohammad Hanif deconstructs the myth of Zia as a savior in his novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. It is an ancient belief of people that Zia was the savior of the nation. But, Mohammad Hanif exposes him as an exploiter and robber of the nation.
- This research article also aims at Mohammad Hanif's exposition of Zia's trick to inculcate the wrong ideology in the minds of his people. He presents himself as a religious figure in the novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. By imposing Hudood ordinance, he propagates the ideas that the grave sinners would be flogged. In actual, those are punished in the novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* who don't commit even a single mistake.
- Barthes argues that by changing context, myth can also be changed. Similarly, it was the context that made Zia the hero of the nation. The way in which Zia used to help old widow made him a Christ-like figure. Such a pious act presents his esteem reverence for women. Hanif changes the context and illustrates that Zia has sexual lust for women. So, by changing context, Hanif alters myth and proves Zia as an immoral person rather than a moral being.
- In this paper, the researcher investigates the false concept of justice, protection, and morality given by Zia to his nation. Hanif reveals that Zia just raises the slogan of justice, morality and fortification, but in reality, he commits injustice with his people. Hanif also cracks the idea that Zia was a great defender of the nation, but he was a puppet in the hands of America.

Framework

To conduct the study, textual evidence is collected to explore and analyze the deconstruction of myth in the novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. The research is qualitative in nature. This research is inductive and fundamental since it deals with theoretical understanding rather practical solution of something concrete. For the analysis of the text, the guiding principles have been taken from Roland Barthes's theory of Myth Today. In his book *Mythologies* (1972) [2], Barthes takes myth as a special type of speech. Special type of speech means a special trick of myth to present an ideology or set values as if it were a natural condition of the world, but it is no more than a man-made perspective. Myth is not a natural truth, but it is a constructed truth which helps the speaker to get power over his audience. By using myth, a storyteller puts a specific ideology in the minds of his audience in order to fulfill his own purpose. The same happens in the novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. In this novel, Zia inculcates the wrong ideologies in the minds of people by

constructing his own myths of justice, morality, religion, equality, personal integrity, and fortification through his institutions. Barthes further explains that myth doesn't describe the natural state of the world, but expresses the intentions of its teller, be that a storyteller, priest, artist or politician like Zia in the novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. In the second section of *Mythologies*, he explores the sign system. Barthes regards myth as a sign has no natural relationship with its object, similarly, myth has no natural relationship with its background story. So, Barthes argues that myth helps to naturalize particular world views, but it doesn't occur naturally (Barthes, 1972).

Literature Review

Many studies have been conducted on Muhammad Hanif's writings and especially on his novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, Muhammad Yar Tanvir, in his research article, *Praetorianism in A Case of Exploding Mangoes: A Critical Analysis*, investigates the social and political circumstances of Pakistan during 1980s, when General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq exercised his power and controlled the government of Pakistan by military take-over till he breathed his last in an air crash near Bahawalpur. Mohammed Hanif, a journalist, and newscaster of BBC London Urdu service has written an allegorical fiction named "A Case of Exploding Mangoes" in which he has narrated various instances of General Zia's praetorianism.

In the paper, *Silencing of Subaltern in Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, Abroo Nazar explores the representation of women in Pakistani literature in English. Pakistani women are represented as victims of religious, cultural, social violence in these works. Abroo finds down the stagnant stereotyping strategies used to represent Pakistani women.

In the paper, *The Empire Writing Back: Contemporary Pakistani Novel in English*, Fatima Hassan elaborates that the post-colonial nations through their writers are trying to forge and present their perspective to the world. In doing so they are using the language of their once colonial masters i.e. English, to produce literature which aims at portraying a variant and a distinct national viewpoint besides re-writing and re-imagining the history of their people and their nations. In order to explain this idea, Fatima Hassan selects the works of Muhammad Hanif. For her, Mohammed Hanif, a contemporary Pakistani writer, writing in English has given it a distinct Pakistani flavor and has molded it to suit his purposes.

In the current research paper, the researcher explores the deconstruction of myths in the novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* by Muhammad Hanif. This particular research investigates how Muhammad Hanif breaks up the traditional beliefs of people about Zia-Ul-Haq. People believe that Zia has performed his role as a savior in the history of Pakistan. But, this paper is about to study that Muhammad Hanif exposes Zia as an exploiter.

A lot of researchers have conducted their research works under the perspective of Roland Barthes's view of Myth Today. In the paper, *Mythological Translations: Drama, Poetry and the Language of Myth*, Dave Kelman and Jane Rafe study that how young people start to develop a critical awareness of mythology as a vehicle for generating contemporary meanings under the perspective of Barthes's concept of myth. For Kelman and Rafe, Roland Barthes describes myth as a symbolic metalanguage that conveys meanings that are deeply embedded in their socio-

cultural context. Through this, the children start to understand and express the deeper symbolism of the mythological narrative and develop a critical awareness of mythology as a vehicle for generating contemporary meanings.

In the article, *Myths, Monarchs, and Prime Ministers: 'Blitz Spirit' Discourses of Royalty and Tony Blair in British Newspaper Responses to the July 7th Bombings*; Darren Kelsey reviews the story of Blitz Spirit as a myth. In this article, Kelsey analyses the role of the Queen and Royal family as symbols of national unity and defiance. Subsequently, he argues that such constructions of Britishness became more complex than a monolithic national narration; Blitz spirit discourses often criticized Tony Blair and rejected him as a figure of British identity in comparison to the Queen or Winston Churchill. Therefore, this paper argues that whilst the Blitz spirit was a problematic feature of post-July 7th discourses, it did not serve one ideological purpose. Rather, through a nuanced approach to Roland Barthes' model of myth, he argues that an ideological battleground occurred when a myth from 1940 was reused to define events in 2005.

The present research, with the application of Roland Barthes' theory of Myth Today, examines the special trick of myth to present ideology and set of values as if it were a natural condition of the world, but in fact, it is no more than a man-made perspective. The purpose of the study is to find how Zia, in the novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, inculcates ideologies in the minds of his people in this novel. Wrong ideologies involve the false concept of justice, religion, morality, protection, and integrity.

Textual Analysis

In the novel, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, Zia is the central character. The whole story revolves around him. Mohammed Hanif writes this novel in order to present the true picture of a historical figure General Zia Ul-Haq before his readers. Hanif breaks up the ancient beliefs of people about Zia as a savior of the nation. If we look at history, history informs us that once Zia was considered savior of the nation. People believed that he protected the boundaries of the country from the assaults of other superpowers like the US and USSR. There are many people who give their opinions in favor of Zia. Through their arguments, they try to prove him as a redeemer of the nation. A critic like Aashiq Dil praises Zia in the words, "he did the right thing at that time. Else our country would be like Afghanistan, invaded by USSR" (Dil, 2016). Quiz Wizard says, "I am Zia Savvy. My honest opinion is that his era of Pakistan was far better than Pakistan of Today. I think he was a good ruler" (Wizard, 2016). In the institution of religion, Zia is also much appreciated. But, some other circles especially literary people condemn him as a dummy person in the hands of America. Mohammed Hanif also exposes Zia as a Puppet ruler used by America against his potential for Russia. In the novel, Mohammed Hanif proves him like a marionette.

So, the arrival of a president – even if this was the president of Pakistan, a country they knew nothing about – and the fact that the man was not only a president but a four-star general, the chief of the largest Muslim army in the world and one of the seven men standing between the Red Army and the Free World (Hanif, 2009, p.119).

Like Mohammed Hanif, many other writers and critics disparage Zia's regime. A writer like Roedad Khan has appraised his personal qualities (Khan, 1997). whereas Altaf Gauhar has rendered severe criticism about his personality and politics. He termed his period as the worst shape of despotism (Gauhar, 1985). Ali Usman Qasmi, is, too, not convinced about any positive impact of his policy of Islamization, on the political system of Pakistan (Usman, 2014). None else than his own companions like General Arif (Arif 1995) and General Chishti (Ali Chishti, 1991) have also criticized various political steps taken and policies made by him during his eleven years long single-handed rule.

To Barthes, myth is based on human history and myth cannot naturally occur. Myth doesn't describe the natural state of the world but expresses the intentions of its teller and mythmaker (Barthes, 1972). Similarly, Zia constructs a myth that he is the savior of the nation. Behind constructing this myth, he was having his own intentions which Hanif reveals by breaking his myth as a savior of the nation. Zia presents himself as an affirmed person. He always puts black sherwani which helps him to naturalize the power of his character. He makes his subjects feel that they are safe under his leadership. Being a four-star chief general, he also causes of morale amongst his military men. But, Mohammed Hanif deconstructs the myth of Zia as a savior of the nation by portraying the character of Colonel Shigri in his novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. Colonel Quli Shigri is an officer in the army. He is a close friend of Zia. In fact, Colonel Shigri is a bridge between Zia and American dollars. Though Shigri is compelled to do wrongdoings for his senior officers, he is very much sincere in the case of his fellow officers. Once, when his one of fellow officers gets injured while smuggling money with him for senior officers sitting in Islamabad, Quli Shigri contacts with Zia take permit to take an injured officer to the hospital. What he receives the message? Hanif tells his readers through the speech of Quli Shigri and narrator of the story Ali Shigri.

"There are people out there fighting the fight and there are people sitting here in Islamabad counting their money, People in uniform. I had gone to pick up one of my officers, who'd lost a leg planting anti-personnel mines. Then I get this message that I should forget the officer and bring this thing back. This is the thing". He pointed to the suitcase. "I opened the suitcase it was full of money. Dollars" (Hanif, 2009, p.299, 300).

So, Hanif proves that Zia was not concerned with the safety of his nation and military men, but he had an only concern to collect money and prolong his tenure of the regime.

Even, people in the regime of Zia felt insecure. They often used to hide their identities. Hanif makes it easy for understanding that how General Secretary, a prisoner in jail, gets afraid of Ali when Ali tells him that "I am from the Armed Forces" (Hanif, 2016, p.163). General Secretary hesitates to tell his name. Yet, he keeps his name secret from Ali because he misunderstands that Ali is also one of Zia's spies. As he says, "I am not so stupid that I'd give you my name. This place is full of spies" (Hanif, 20016, p.162).

Roland Barthes takes myth as a type of speech (Barthes, 1972, p.174). Myth as a special type of speech means a special trick of myth to present an ideology or set of values as if it were a natural condition of the world, but in fact, it is no more man-made perspective (Barthes, 1972). By inculcating the ideology of Islamization in the minds of people, Zia constructs a myth to

prove himself a religious figure. In the novel, Zia always recites Holy Verses from the Holy Quran. He spends a large part of the day in the company of the Holy Quran and his Imam Masjid. Similarly, Zia, in his era, raised the slogan of Islamization. Through this ideology, he misguided his people in order to rule over them. He misuses the religion in his regime. Writers like Joseph Conrad and George Orwell also have a representation of such figures in their writings. In the novel, *Heart of Darkness*, The character of Mr. Kurtz is similar to Zia. He also disguises himself as a missionary and rules over innocent Africans. *Animal Farm* is another example of the exploitation of a specific ideology. First, Napoleon invades Manor Farm by propounding the ideology of communism. Later on, he intrudes other all animals and makes them his subjects.

To control the political system, strengthen his hold, enhance and enlarge his power base and prolong the spell of his rule, Zia made his aim to Islamize the state system, as the sole justification for his take over. He devised a strategy to achieve his goal. Meanwhile, the end of the presidential tenure in August 1978 provided him with ample opportunity to expand his power base. He occupied the office of the President thus becoming the sole distributor as the President and the Chief Martial Law Administrator of Pakistan. To start with he declared that he had occupied the presidency to continue the arrangement and would relinquish the said offices as soon as some suitable replacement would be available which never happened till he was killed in an aircraft on 17th of August 1988 (Sherbaz Khan, p.521) ^[11].

During the 1977 movement, the slogan for the introduction of Nizam-Mustafa became much popular and gained significant support. Keeping in view the situation Zia owned this popular ideology and declared to transform the political, social and administrative structures of the state in accordance with the Islamic norms and principles which subsequently became his base for attracting and gaining popular support (Dawn, 1978).

For legitimizing his rule, Zia started giving political interpretations of Islam and its system. Under the support of a religious circle having some credibility, he launched a campaign to give a new interpretation to concepts like democracy, Islam and power. In one of his interviews, he said “the Muslims and especially the Pakistani Muslims behind in one God, one Prophet, one Book, and one ruler. In Islam, it is not important that how someone had captured the power. Under the system, it is important that the ruler must be a practicing Muslim. If he fulfills the said condition, the people obey him otherwise they oust him (G. W. Choudhury, 1988, p.113) ^[10].

Mohammed Hanif depicts that the imposition of Hudood Ordinance was also Zia’s special trick to prolong the spell of his rule. He was aware of the fact that Pakistan is the male dominant society. Here, by playing women’s card, he could easily get support and power. Zia’s announcement of the Hudood Ordinance and especially punishments for women pleaded his ideology of Islamization. Historian and South Asian scholar, Aysha Jalal says the motive behind the imposition of Hudood Ordinance by Zia was political. She states “realizing that very few had been persuaded, the General, a wily social technician, calculated that playing the women’s card could confirm his regime’s commitment to Islam and, by extension, its legitimacy” (Aysha Jalal, 1991, p.101) ^[12].

In the novel, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, Mohammed Hanif unmasks Zia’s propaganda of Islamization in a very comic way.

Hanif by changing a serious issue into a comic one wants his readers to understand how much Zia was ignorant about Islamic Teachings. In the novel, Zainab, a blind lady, is raped by a bunch of men. For the imposition of Hudood Ordinance, Zia takes advice from his mentor, Qadi, retired judge of the Saudi Sharia court in Mecca. General Zia often expresses his desire to die while on a pilgrimage to Mecca and to bury at Qadi’s feet (Hanif, 2009, p. 173). The way in which Zia takes guidance is very comic and breaks the myth of Zia as a religious figure.

“Yes, Qadi, I wanted your guidance on this matter: what happens if the accused says that she was forced to fornicate? How do we establish whether she is telling the truth? I mean, sometimes you can look at woman’s face and tell that she is a fornicator, but we need a legal procedure to establish it”(Hanif, 2009, p.174).

Qadi spoke as if he had thought about this for a long time. “Women always make this excuse after they are caught fornicating, but we all know that rap is not easy to commit. The perpetrator will need at least four accomplices. There will have to be two men holding her by her arms, two pinning down her legs and then the fifth one between her legs, committing the act. So the answer is yes, a woman can be raped and it’s a serious crime” (Hanif, 2009, p.174).

“So the woman will be required to recognize all five culprits in the court”? Zia asked. “Our law, you know, is not set in stone, it encourages us to use our common sense. So two men who are holding her down by her arms maybe the woman would not be able to recognize two and the judge can make the exception”. “And what if she didn’t see any of the culprits? What if they were wearing masks”? General Zia could tell the old man was suddenly angry. “Why would rapist wear a mask? Is he a bank robber? Bank robbers wear masks. Kidnappers wear masks. I have never heard of a rapist wearing a mask in my forty years as a judge”. General Zia felt stupid as Qadi continued (Hanif, 2009, p. 175) ^[9].

Hanif also breaks up the myth of Zia as a reformer. Hanif makes his readers aware that Zia was more interested in the glorification of his self-righteousness than the imposition of Islam. He often boasts up the punishments which he gave people whom he called sinners. The enthusiasm and excitement in his voice, while telling about sinners, indicates that he was concerned to punish them instead of their reformation and rehabilitation. As in the text:

“With your blessings, I have introduced the laws in Pakistan and by the grace of Allah hundreds of sinners have already been convicted: we have two hundred thieves waiting for their hands to be amputated, thousands of drunkards have been lashed in public” (Hanif, 2009, p.173) ^[9].

Myth can easily be distorted. It depends on the context and specific situation. It is a context which accommodates one to construct a specific myth. Barthes asserts that by changing the context of myth, one can change the effects of myth (Barthes, 1972) ^[2]. The same happens in the novel, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, Zia molds situation according to his own requirements. He sets such parameters and directions which lead people to accept him as a moral being and Christ-like figure. He assists old women and especially widows financially. He also provides them respect and esteem reverence. The episode, in which he distributes white envelopes of money and him pates the women’s heads, indicates extreme respect for women in Zia’s heart.

He was distributing white envelopes and he handed over the envelopes he patted the women’s heads as if they were not poor

women getting some much-needed cash but schoolchildren at morning assembly receiving consolation prizes from their headmaster (Hanif, 2009, p.145) ^[9].

These lines show how much Zia was having respect for women in his heart. But in the novel, Hanif changes the context with the addition of Joanne Herrings' character. Joanne Herrings is a newscaster and journalist. She often visits Zia for the updates of his new activities. Zia himself often visits Joanne very excitedly. Through this Character, Hanif proves that Zia was having sexual lust for women rather than respect. Hanif informs his readers:

Joanne lunged towards him, the self-control that had helped him survive three wars, one coup, and two elections vanished. He left the table that was to be his defense against temptation and moved towards her with extended arms. Her left breast pressed lightly against the strain of his safari suit and General Zia closed his eyes, his chin rested on the satin bra strap on her shoulder (Hanif, 2009, p.122, 123) ^[1].

By portraying the character of Joanne Herrings, Hanif deconstructs the myth of Zia as a moral being. So, by changing context, Hanif alters myth and proves Zia as an immoral person rather than a moral being.

In Zia's regime, there was gender discrimination and injustice between men and women. Legally and illegally, women were ill-treated. They were deprived of their basic human and political rights. The proposition of Hudood Ordinance gave power to men over a woman. Legally, in courts, women were punished and men were released often in the case of fornication. The following case study embodies gender discrimination during Zia's dictatorship. Sixteen years old blind girls, Safia, was raped by a feudal in Sahiwal in 1983s. The case was registered against the perpetrator in July 1983s. The court asked Safia to recognize the rapist. But, she could not identify the culprit because of her blindness. As a result, her pregnancy was taken as evidence of consensual sex means fornication. The court sentenced her for the imprisonment of three years, fifth lashes and 1000 rupees fine. The judge said that the punishment was light because the girl was young and disable (Mumataz and Fareeda, 1987, p.103) ^[13].

Muhammad Hanif also explains such conditions of women through the character of blind Zainab in his novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. Zainab is a blind girl with whom some fornicators rape. But, the court imprisons Zainab instead of rapists. Being helpless, she just curses Zia, "may your blood turn to poison. May the worms eat your innards" (Hanif, 2009, p.306) ^[9]. So, the above-mentioned examples of rape cases demonstrate the pitfalls for a woman seeking justice in a rape case and depict the extreme gender discrimination in the regime of Zia-UL-Haq.

Conclusion

This research has been planned to investigate the deconstruction of myths in the novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* by Mohammed Hanif, a Pakistani novelist from the perspective of Roland Barthes's theory of Myth Today. The findings of the present research paper suggest that the historical beliefs of people about Zia are totally based on myth, and myth doesn't occur naturally. Barthes, in his theory of Myth Today, argues that myth is a special type of speech. A special type of speech means a special trick of myth to present an ideology or set values as if it were a natural condition of the world, but it is no more than a man-made perspective. Zia's slogans of Islamization, morality, justice, fortification, the imposition of Hudood Ordinance, and

respect for women all are myth-based. There is no concrete truth behind all these claims. Even, Hanif presents Zia as an exploiter, immoral person, lusty, robber, ignorant and dummy one in the hands of America against its potential for Russia. So, the research ends in proving the hypothesis that Zia's sovereignty results from myth and myth are just a man-made perspective.

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