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**Dr. Archana Mishra**  
Senior Assistant professor,  
Anjaneya University, Raipur,  
Chhattisgarh, India

## The influence of mythology on contemporary literature

**Dr. Archana Mishra**

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### Abstract

The enduring impact of mythology on modern literature is substantial, influencing both thematic and structural aspects across genres. This paper delves into how mythological motifs, archetypes, and symbols continue to shape contemporary storytelling, providing a means for writers to explore universal human experiences, societal values, and cultural identity. By examining the works of authors such as Neil Gaiman, Madeline Miller, and Margaret Atwood, this study analyses how mythological elements are reinterpreted and integrated into present-day narratives. Through the use of myth, contemporary literature addresses profound themes such as power, heroism, gender roles, and the balance between tradition and progress. Furthermore, this research explores the role of mythological figures and narratives as instruments of cultural critique, shedding light on the evolving nature of myth in modern society. Ultimately, the continued significance of mythology in literature highlights its ability to bridge the gap between ancient and contemporary storytelling, offering profound symbolism, deeper meaning, and creative inspiration for both writers and readers.

**Keywords:** Mythology in modern literature, archetypes and symbols, contemporary storytelling, cultural identity and societal values, literary reinterpretation of myth

### Introduction

Mythology, with its vast repertoire of tales involving deities, heroes, and supernatural occurrences, has long served as a cornerstone of literary tradition. Although primarily linked with ancient civilisations such as the Greeks, Romans, and Norse cultures, its influence continues to resonate within contemporary literature. Whether intentionally or subtly, modern authors infuse mythological themes into their narratives, enriching them with complexity and depth. Myths have historically functioned as allegories, symbols, or structural frameworks, often reflecting the cultural, social, and spiritual fabric of a given society. Their narrative essence remains an indispensable aspect of literature, shaping texts throughout history. From Homer's epics to the literary works of Virgil, Dante, and Milton, mythology has continually informed literary expression. In the medieval era, myths featured prominently in romances and dramatic performances, while Romantic-era literature embraced them as a means of conveying deep emotions. In modern literature, myths serve as allusions and references, enabling authors to explore human complexities in contemporary contexts. Figures such as T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats revitalised myths within their literary compositions, employing them to create order and coherence. This practice, known as 'mythopoeia,' involves the construction of fictional or reimagined myths. For instance, Sylvia Plath wove elements of classical and European mythology into her poetry, merging these ancient narratives with personal experiences to articulate themes of anguish, identity, and societal expectations.

### Integration of Mythological Themes in Modern Writing

Mythological narratives continue to enrich contemporary literature by providing timeless themes, symbols, and motifs that resonate with readers. Writers today either reinterpret existing myths or subtly reference mythological figures and archetypes in their work. For example, Madeline Miller's *Circe* reimagines the character of Circe from *The Odyssey*, expanding her narrative beyond the one-dimensional portrayal found in Homer's work.

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Dr. Archana Mishra**  
Senior Assistant professor,  
Anjaneya University, Raipur,  
Chhattisgarh, India

## The Role of Myth in Structuring Plot, Characters, and Symbolism

Mythology serves as a foundational structure for contemporary storytelling, allowing writers to explore universal concepts such as destiny, transformation, and the human psyche. The archetypal hero's journey, with its trials and eventual metamorphosis, remains a prominent narrative framework. Mythological symbols, often layered with profound meanings, enable authors to enrich their storytelling and engage audiences on multiple levels.

## Why Authors Continue to Draw from Mythology

Writers frequently turn to mythology due to its universal relevance, as myths encapsulate fundamental aspects of the human condition—love, heroism, sacrifice, and justice. These narratives offer an effective means of conveying intricate themes in an accessible manner. By employing ancient myths, contemporary authors establish a connection with audiences across different cultural and historical contexts, ensuring their work retains depth and significance.

## Reader Reception and the Future of Mythological Influence

The positive response to mythological references in modern literature underscores their lasting appeal. As contemporary writers continue to explore the intricacies of human existence, mythology will remain a fertile source of inspiration, influencing a wide range of literary forms and genres. The adaptability of myth ensures its continued relevance, providing a rich platform for examining human nature and the socio-political landscape.

## Defining Myth and Mythology

The term 'myth' originates from the Greek word *mythos*, signifying a fable, legend, or tale. Myths, often passed down orally, serve to explain religious origins, natural occurrences, or supernatural phenomena. Mythology refers to the collective body of myths within a society, offering insights into its worldview and belief systems. Figures such as Adam and Eve, Achilles, Odysseus, and Shiva exemplify the mythological heritage of different cultures. Myths function both as narratives and ideological constructs, influencing societal thought and cultural development (Segal, 2004) <sup>[10]</sup>. Ernst Cassirer viewed myth as a fundamental mode of thought, shaping human perception much like language does. Northrop Frye argued that all literary genres stem from myth, which continues to evolve as it is adapted into new literary contexts. Joseph Campbell identified four key functions of mythology: the mystical (instilling wonder), the cosmological (explaining the universe), the sociological (establishing social structures), and the psychological (aiding individuals in making sense of their experiences).

## The Role of Mythology on Literature

Historically, mythology has served as a tool for shaping cultural and ideological narratives, influencing societies and legitimising power structures. Scholars such as James Frazer have explored how myths emerge from societal needs, often reinforcing authority and control. In literature, mythological themes and symbols frequently function as metaphors for contemporary concerns, as authors reinterpret ancient narratives to comment on present-day realities.

## The Use of Myth on Contemporary Literature

Modern writers often employ mythology to examine complex themes and depict the fragmented nature of contemporary existence. Mythological references and allusions add layers of meaning, allowing for nuanced exploration of human experience. For example, T.S. Eliot utilised myth as a structural device in *The Waste Land*, using ancient themes to portray societal decline and regeneration. Similarly, Sylvia Plath incorporated mythological imagery into her poetry to explore themes of trauma, victimhood, and gender roles. By intertwining mythology with personal and societal struggles, Plath crafted evocative, multidimensional narratives.

## Conclusion

The significant and multifaceted influence of mythology in contemporary literature underscores its ongoing relevance in exploring fundamental human experiences. By drawing upon ancient myths, modern authors construct intricate characters, address socio-cultural issues, and engage with timeless philosophical questions. Through adaptation and reinvention, mythological themes continue to captivate readers, offering new insights into the complexities of human existence. Whether used as direct inspiration or subtle reference, mythology remains an essential creative force within modern literature.

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