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## Study of mythology: In the context of structuralists theoretical framework

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### Abstract

The present paper searches some of the inmost niches that expose structuralism in the study of mythology of all types. To understand well the formation of mythology we adopt the theory of structuralism. What is mythology, a sequence of events that develop to become a narrative? If we relate these sequences of incidents into one chain, myth becomes a story, an oral traditional story. But does it have any differences from the ordinary stories told by nannies? The stories have main characters, heroes and heroines, they are special because special charms are added to their personalities. The mythical characters are also made charming to look like hero and heroine, they are having super human qualities too, and they chose to roam about in our surroundings. Hence, these myths are interwoven within the social structures. This aspect of the mythology is under study in this paper but within the theoretical framework of structuralist approach towards these narratives. We don't indulge into the religious connotations of mythology, but just when they interact with the commonality of lives, creating similarities of structure; perceiving them functioning just the languages do in transferring messages.

**Keywords:** Myths, mythology, traditional, special charms, religious connotations. traditional spiral ways

### Introduction

#### Definition as per "Your Dictionary:"

- A body or collection of myths belonging to a people and addressing their origin, history, deities, ancestors, and heroes.
- A body of myths associated with an event, individual, or institution: "A new mythology, essential to the ... American funeral rite, has grown up" (Jessica Mitford)
- The field of scholarship dealing with the systematic collection and study of myths.

Mythology must be distinguished from myth. Colloquially, myth is considered to be associated with falsehood, or lie. The word however is subjective truth that defines a culture. Mythology is the body of stories, symbols and rituals that communicates that subjective truth of a particular culture (Kanti).

In order to understand what myth really is, we have to look through cliché and fallacy attached with it. Taken from Greek word "mythos" meaning story, mythology also becomes a story, or a chain-series sequence of events told traditionally. English language adopted this word in nineteenth century. In a broader sense mythography is a set of traditional notes of fairylike tales, with personification of natural phenomenon, overelaborated details of historical events. Or we can say that myths or Mythos are the traditional sacred stories which take over the religious connotations of the social rituals.

Though the word "Myth" by its literal meaning generally, is an account which does not have any authenticity. It is just the delusionary telltale which moves around in the social networks, where the people love to indulge in storytelling. They amalgamate almost everything into the story in order to make it interesting keeping undertones of religions too. Into the structure of myth, we find it touching the super-sonic waves of human mind, where the reason, reasons everything and accept the caricatures that conjure up by their own willingness to mold things into pleasing notes.

### Mythology – Traditional spiral ways

So, mythography is something moving around the social networks and making people believe upon the incidents related to them. Myths have their existence in every society, in one way or the other. The incidents, the way they are told and even the structural undertones are astoundingly similar. Each myth speaks the same language. Same insinuations and situations betrayed in all, translated in religious aspects, because no myth is complete without the supernatural beings.

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The supernatural having super powers cannot at all be humans, so super humans can only be gods and goddesses ruling the human world. That is what we find in every mythology of every social structure.

“Myths are specific accounts of gods or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience.” (Encyclopedia Britannica)

Can mythology be only having religious characteristics? The answer to this question is not a tricky one, if we look deep into the creation of mythology. It is said, out of the chaos, mother earth – Gaea - was born somehow, then Tartarus, then Eros, to complete all regions of earth. Thus, if the genesis is with the birth of gods and goddesses, the story must have engulfed the religious understanding of the people too. No doubt then that myths are sacred stories, based on fictional characters.

“By extension from this primary religious meaning, the word *myth* may also be used more loosely to refer to an ideological belief when that belief is the object of a quasi-religious faith.” (Encyclopedia Britannica)

Why these got roots in ancient world? Here we have another question surfaced up. Perhaps because in ancient world people were more indulged in worshipping idols, hence such stories had easy access to the nooks and corners of their minds, which already had sort of same feelings towards their religion.

Proof of it is, that these mythologies are most believed in those religions where there are idols, like Greeks, Egyptians, and Hinduism etc. Or perhaps people had stories as their only pastime, and mode of entertainment then. Those stories were heard more voraciously which had gods, and goddesses, with awe inspiring situations.

We have gods, goddesses, natural phenomenon, heroes, and dragons as the contents of all types of mythologies. It will not be wrong to say that mythologies speak the same language, arouse the same feelings for those who listen and for those who relate. Myths are no longer myths, but have become essential part of the cult and culture of the most of the religions spreading throughout the world. These could be told and retold to highlight the origin of ancient world. They gave so over-emphasized status to the heroes that they got the status of gods.

Amazingly, with the passage of time, these have not died out rather sprouted new additions, upon the same old foundations. The only difference is that today these are more an allusion. In the present paper we don't discuss if the mythologies are real accounts of the real people or the distortion of the historical facts. At present we are striving to study the similarities of myths and the language they speak. Whatever the myths are: distorted historical accounts or the allegories or the personifications or models for morality, they speak the same language. This similarity is under discussion throughout this paper.

“Myth has existed in every society. Indeed, it would seem to be a basic constituent of human culture.” (Encyclopedia Britannica)<sup>[1]</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/myth> Myths are specific accounts of gods or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience. The term *mythology* denotes both the study of myth and the body of myths belonging to a particular religious tradition.

Myths are the indispensable part of human culture, hence can be dealt as a separate entity that survives within human perception. Claude Levi-Strauss in his “Structural Study of Myth” says that: “Mythology is a language.”

As it has same connotation and denotations, it speaks the same story but seemingly in different patterns, whatever region it belongs to.

### Structuralists Theory

Claude Levi-Strauss, Structural Anthropologist, says that “Mythology is a language”, (Barthes, 1991) because it has its same meaning and methodologies. According to him the same methods can be used to approach a mythology as used to study any language. There are three-fold functions which pervade into the study of myth. First of all, the meaning is not taken from any outside sources rather it is inherent in the composition of different parts of the story. Language works into the myth intertwined. Language in mythology is very complicated than in any ordinary structural study.

Saussure examined language as *langue*, according to him all the basic structures of language can be applied to any kind of language whether it is official or literature – there always will be a system of making meaning inside. Hence this signifying system, includes any system that creates meaning out of cultural signs. This is the basic idea, or the foundation of the structuralist analysis.

Saussure applied the theory of *langue* and *parole* to the study of language while the same theme is adopted by Levi-Strauss in the study of anthropology, in the kinship system, the same applied into the structural study of mythology as well. Both the scholars had unveiled:

“The timeless universal human truths.” (Klages M. , 2006)

But these truths have been studied objectively and very tangibly scientifically. For Levi-Strauss all the human conditions have underlying structures, all the cultural organizations share the same structures. Hence the purpose of structuralist, is to find out the true human condition.

The human condition is basically revealed by picking out every similarity all humans have though living in different societies. According to Levi-Strauss, they all share kinship. Hence this factor of kinship draws out similarities among the people across the globe.

The Study of Myth as language – Structuralist theoretical framework

What actually makes myth a language?

It is comprised of certain units

These units are put together according to certain rule/laws

Based upon binary oppositions these create relations among themselves.

Therefore, taking myth as language, we can apply the theoretical framework of structuralists. Myth is language because just like language that we speak consisting of word units and signs, it has to be told in order to survive. So, we see myths are told and retold and are always on the circulation in the society, otherwise, perhaps, they would extinct, and would not see another decade. For any language, survival time limit is a decade, in that time frame, if the language manages to survive, it lasts longer than the decade. Hence myths also function in the same manner. One decade has them glorifying and the other decade perhaps polishes the units so as to survive in the coming decade.

Saussure's *langue* and *parole* can also be applied to the structural study of myth, *langue* refers to the written signs that make up the language, and *parole* is the utterances of

the written signs. However, if we adopt the structuralist view of analyzing the language, taking myth as one of the unique languages we can decipher quite a bit, that cultural signs make up the language and the interpretations the perceptions of those signs when they are actually out of the mouth in the shape of some sort of sounds, these become the parole. If we look at the mythology of different regions, the similarities are quite obvious. There is talk of the super humans, their exploits, the element of allegory, hence it is explicitly making myth a unique language with the similarities and the combination of language and parole, which creates a relationship among different elements that stick together shaping it as a whole.

Based on Saussure's theory, for Levi-Strauss, Language functions, as reversible time and parole, as irreversible time. (Klages M. ) Myth is both historical and ahistorical at one and the same time. Taken as history, it will be parole, as told in irreversible time, and as reversible time, it is language, because it has the property of being timeless. But on the other hand, there is third level that rules the mythology. I.e. the property of being absorptive, or the property of malleability. Myth can be translated in any language without losing its basic elements, it can be reduced to certain limits, it can be expanded by some more additions, but with all these alterations it never loses its basic function and structure.

Levi-Strauss, in his Structural Study of Myth, is more interested in picking out commonalities in the myths of all regions globally. Though myths are malleable, they are not bound by any fixed rules or accuracy, even though they all are similar in structure. In order to solve the enigma, he looks into the structure of the mythology. There is structural sameness, which allows myths to be timeless. Unlike Saussure, Levi-Strauss, concentrates on bundles of relations or the sets of relationships myths cuddle in themselves.

In order to give myths, the language-like property, Levi-Strauss deconstructs myths into several smallest inter-related units, called "mythemes". Each mytheme is a separate event of the narrative of the myth. Reading synchronically or diachronically the structures are same but each variant is unique. Looking at the columns of variants vertically he tries to access the logical connection among them. According to Levi-Strauss, there is logical connection but underneath there is inherent contradiction, between like binary oppositions, the complete vs the incomplete. There are always some parts present in the narration and some parts are missing, this missing creates contradiction which according to him is the cultural dilemma.

Oedipus is the prominent character study of all schools of thought. Levi-Strauss also delinks this narrative into mythemes, each theme is ominous and present an approaching tension. He then analyzes each unit of tension in binary oppositions. This is an important factor for Levi-Strauss, these binary oppositions are the universal binding factors that relate each myth.

According to him the structural analysis of mythology is like bringing order to chaos. Every mythology seems to be in chaos, there are contents alike, the descriptions, and the oppositions, summed up as variants. But once these are interpreted according to the methods expatiated by Structuralists, things come in order.

"A fanciful creation of the mind in one place would be unique, you would not find the same creation in a completely different place, and my problem was trying to

find out if there was some kind of order behind this apparent disorder." (C., 1995)

### **Myths trespassing human mind barriers**

"Myths think in men without their knowing". As Levi-Strauss claims myths are based on the contradictions that function on the basis of binary oppositions. These contradictions are the basic elements of all the cultures. Hence study of mythology in the context of cultural quandaries, make it an important part of human thinking.

Mythology was created by human minds, whatever we find in the contents, synchronically or diachronically into the mythemes, come up as another form of human aspiration and desires. Super human qualities attached to humans giving them the status of gods, or super natural beings, is perhaps the long-lasting desire of humans. Hence even if in the Oedipus character, we find the human aspirations, or those desires which man cannot resist. All the visionary characters of mythology are bound by these human desires though they are superhuman at the same time.

Therefore, it is not wrong to say that mythologies survive because they are accepted willingly by the human minds. It is never so absurd to be unacceptable. This mythical thinking is inherent / embedded in human mind. It trespasses the human mind and enter the chambers where they set pleasantly. So, myths are the part of human psyche. (Glaveanu)

### **Conclusion**

In the end, we reverberate "mythology is a language". As our study throughout this paper has already elaborated, mythology shares widely all the important aspects of language. It has to be repeated in order to sustain. As Levi-Strauss claims, there is kinship that creates similarities among mythologies of different cultures. Myth can be used to decode a single sign. (McDougall, 2012)

During the research upon this topic there were several mythologies that remained under active study. When each one of them was broken into mythemes, the results were astoundingly similar. Studied in the context of related culture, those revealed the basic intricacies of human awareness. These myths cannot be extricated from the thinking patterns of human sub consciousness, because these come right out of them and reveal the overall trend-thoughts of the society in which those are moving. They contain such symbols and connotations that can be used to make people understand the typical function they intend to.

Hence just like language myths can very easily make one understand what they want to deliver, and in what manner they want to deliver the message. Right or wrong this message can be delivered to the target personnel, because these are told in such plausible monotones. This function can only be performed by language. Because language can make people understand what it intends to.

The same idea of narration we find in Vladimir Propp's structuralist analysis of folklores. (Propp, 1928) Study of mythology in the framework of Structuralists approach makes it easy to understand the cultural correspondences too. Residing in the four corners of the world, the cultures may seem to be different but actually they are not. As there is one common language that is spoken always with religious inferences and that is mythology. Mythology binds the world by thinking kinship.

“History often resembles ‘Myth’, because they are both ultimately of the same stuff.” (Tolkien, 1939)

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