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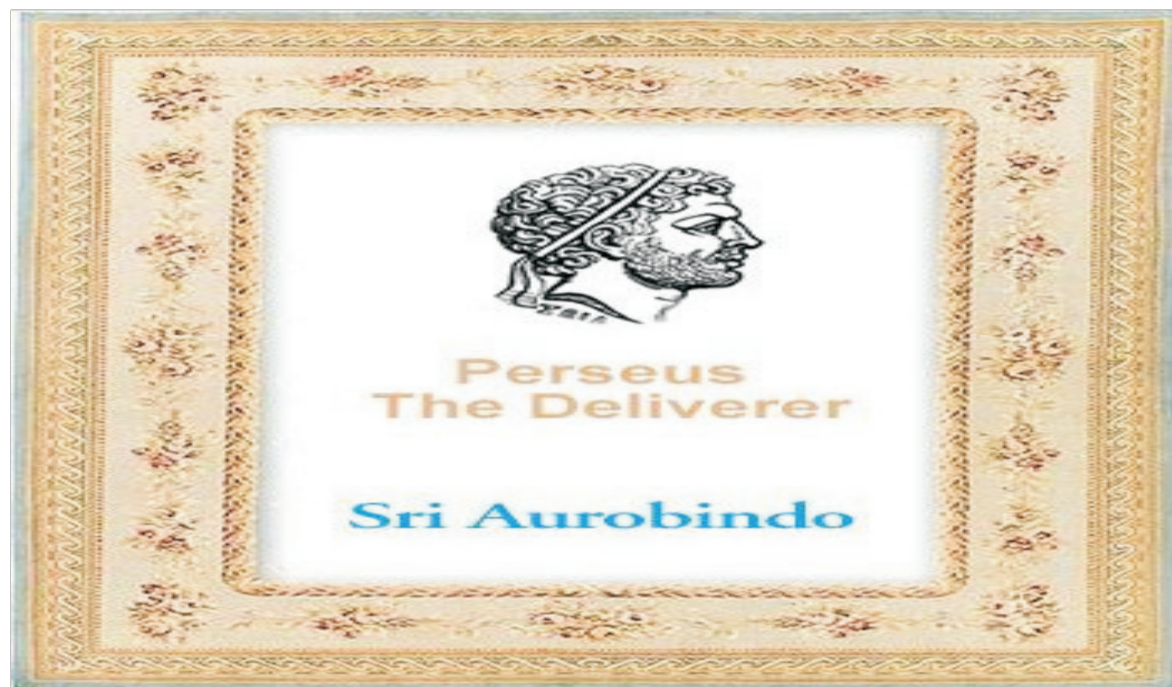
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THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND IN SRI. AUROBINDO'S
PLAY *PERSEUS THE DELIVERER*



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ABSTRACT:

The present paper is an attempt to focus on the use of myth and legend in Sri. Aurobindo's play *Perseus the Deliverer*. There is a bulk of oral and written literature based on the myths, legends and folklore found in each and every culture. Myths are traditional stories of unknown authorship associated with gods or semi-divine heroes. These are the fictional narratives which many believe to be based on fact. In reality, these stories are the products of people's since ancient times. Whereas, these tales are considered as unscientific, superstitious and ritualistic by the modern scientific world. All cultures have developed their own myths, and legends consisting of narratives of their religions, gods and goddesses. They are passed from one generation to the next through oral and written literatures, through scriptures, through folk arts and drama also.

KEYWORDS: Perseus the Deliverer , Myth and Legend , modern scientific world.

INTRODUCTION:

The study of myths and legends was first initiated in the twentieth century by the European anthropologist, Sir James Frazer. Many writers around the world such as Rabindranath Tagore, Sri. Aurobindo, Girish Karnad etc. has taken special interest in myths as the thematic material for their works. India is, infact, the source and also the storehouse of numerous myths and legends. It is a known fact that the Indians are extremely religious by nature. They believe in their religion and mythology and respect their age-old myths found in her tales, songs, dances, art and drama.

The Concept of Myth and Legend

Origin : The word 'myth' is derived from the Greek word 'mythos' which originally meant 'speech', but which later came to mean fable or legend. According to which "the retelling of stories that a particular culture believes to be true and that use supernatural events or characters to explain the nature of universe and humanity". Whereas in common usage, myth means a fictional story which many believe to be based on fact. It is a product of the past and mostly is considered by the modern scientific world as unscientific, superstitious and ritualistic in form. According to Webster's New World College Dictionary points out.

Myth is a traditional story of unknown authorship, ostensibly with a historical basis, but serving usually to explain some phenomenon of nature, the origin of men, or the customs, institutions, religious rites etc. of a people : myths usually involve the exploits of gods and heroes.

The terms like legend, folktale and fables are sometimes used interchangeable with myth. But they are not the same. It is rather difficult to distinguish them. Mostly, a legend originates in history. It is a fantastic tale of a heroic person who actually existed in the past but whose exploits are not the authentic records of history. The folktales, which take place in a make-believe world, legends seem plausible and tell about events which could have taken place in the past. Legend exist between fact and faith, illusion and reality. They provide examples of the virtues of honoured personalities from the history of a nation. Usually the subject of the legend is a saint, a king, a hero, a famous person or a war.

The use of myth and legend is thoroughly utilized by the Indian English playwright, especially Sri. Aurobindo, to instruct the blind-folded, indifferent twentieth century audiences. Thus, Sri Aurobindo becomes the voice of protest of the Indian masses and functions as literary social reformer.

Use of myth and legend in the Play *Perseus the Deliverer* :

Perseus the Deliverer is the only play by Sri. Aurobindo published in his life time first in Bipin Chandra Pal's Calcutta Weekly, *Bande Mataram*, serially from June 30, 1907 to October 13, 1907, then in the book form in 1942 and finally included in the first of the two volumes of *Collected Plays and Stories* published by Sri. Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry. It was written in the first decade (1893-1906) of the twentieth century.

The play is actually based on a legend from Greek Mythology associated with Perseus and Andromeda which had already found dramatic expressions in Euripides, Corneille and also in Kingsley's poem entitled, *Andromeda*, in the form of a romantic tale of mythical characters. The five act play written in beautiful blank verse in English is structured on Elizabethan drama, and also points out to the influences of Kalidasa's romantic comedy.

The legend of Perseus is quite popular in Greek mythology since ancient times. Sri. Aurobindo, however, made certain changes in its locale, settings and in a few characters to suit his dramatic purpose. Sri. Aurobindo himself comments in his Preface to the play as "In this piece the ancient legend has been divested of its original character of a heroic myth". (Aurobindo, 1971 Rpt. 1995:1)

In his book, *Myth in Indian Drama*, the critic comments,

The myth is necessary because of the philosophical basis of Sri. Aurobindo's concept of change and revolution. Revolution, if it is only historical and materialistic, can bring about change in the human environment without changing man's spiritual condition. Hence the necessity of myth in this play. (Joshi, 1984:102).

Following is the Legend of Perseus as summarized by the dramatist himself in the preface to the play which is as follows;

ACRISIUS, the Argive King, warned by an oracle that his daughter's son would be the agent of his death, hoped to escape his doom by shutting her up in a brazen tower. But Zeus, the King of Gods, descended in to her prison in a shower of gold and Danae bore to him a son named Perseus. Danae and her child were exposed in a boat without sail or oar on the sea, but here too fate and the gods intervened and, guided by a divine protection, the boat bore her safely to the Island of Seriphos. There Danae was received and honoured by the King. When Perseus had grown to manhood the King, wishing to marry Danae, decided to send him to his death and to that end ordered him to slay the Gorgon Medusa in the wild, unknown and snowy North and bring to him her head the sight of which turned men to stone. Perseus, aided by Athene, the goddess of wisdom, who gave him the divine sword Herpe, winged shoes to bear him through the air, her shield or aegis and the cap of invisibility, succeeded in his quest after many adventures. In his returning he came to Syria and found Andromeda, daughter of Cepheus and Cassiopea, King and Queen of Syria, chained to the rocks by the people to be devoured by a sea monster as an atonement for her mother's impiety against the sea-god, Poseidon. Perseus slew the monster and rescued and wedded Andromeda. (1)

This legend of Perseus as narrated by Sri. Aurobindo does sound familiar even to the Indian readers since the tale almost resemble the Krishna myth from the Indian Epic *Mahabharata*. The mythical character of Perseus appears like Krishna, whereas Poseidon strikes as the cruel Kaunsa to the Hindus. In *Mahabharata* Lord Krishna slayed Kaunsa. Similarly the hero of the play Perseus slayed Poseidon the sea-monster. However, it is the later parts of Perseus's stay in Syria of this legend which provided Sri. Aurobindo the ready, -made material to weave the magic of legend into the play.

The five act drama begins with the prologue at the prophetic warning of Athene, the Greek goddess of wisdom and power, to Poseidon the mythical sea monster, and ends with the attaining of divinity of the two mortals – Perseus and Princess Andromeda. In between is woven a charming tale of love, romance, ambition, adventure, political games, terrible fights, villainy, revenge and humanity intermingled with beautiful verse and wit.

The playwright Sri. Aurobindo has staged a host of characters in three categories-they are good, bad and indifferent. Athene the goddess of wisdom; Perseus the deliverer; Princess Andromeda : Prince Iolaus ; his beloved Cydone ; Cepheus, the King of Syria ; Cassiopea, his Queen; Perissus the butcher, Andromeda's maids Praxila and Diomedea all belong to the good side of humanity. Whereas on the other side, we have the Sea-Monster Poseidon ; the cunning priest of Poseidon's temple, Polydaon ; King of Tyre, Phineus, the local leader, Therops represent the bad side. Where as the characters like the foreign merchants Tyranus, Smerdas ; the Syrian captain, Dercetes ; the Chaldean Guard, Nebassar ; Polydaon's servant, Cireas etc belongs to the indifferent set of characters.

In popular opinion of the critics and scholars, the play incited nationalistic feelings among the enslaved people of India and presented a path to his evolutionary theory through the character of Perseus and Andromeda. Symbolically, the playwright Sri. Aurobindo seems to have made her character resemble the lovely, compassionate and humane Mother India, who is bound in shackles by

the British Raj. At the time of writing the play, the country was in absolute turmoil. It was being ruled by the foreign Britishers for fifty years. The nationalistic feelings against the British were on the rise. Whereas the cunning cruel British Viceroy Lord Curzon in 1905 had enforced a division of the country. And the country, India was crying for peace, justice and home rule. There was not any saviour in sight who could deliver her from the atrocious foreign power. In such a situation, the message delivered by the playwright's Sri. Aurobindo's play would gain significance and would fuel the already burning fire of nationalism. This nationalistic feeling in Sri. Aurobindo clearly seems to have outpoured through his play, *Perseus the Deliverer*. The playwright's stage direction, at the beginning of Act IV, Scene V, regarding the chained Andromeda, resembles his own mother India, the once glorious country but presently under captivity of the foreign and merciless British Empire.

Indirectly the playwright uses symbolism in the play *Perseus the Deliverer*. Andromeda is Mother India and Poseidon, the sea monster referred as English ruler or the queen. Polydaon is the Viceroy like Lord Curzon, whereas Phineus represents the selfish Indian rulers who, for their own material gains sided with the invading English forces. Therops is just like selfish Indian politician. Cepheus is another representative of those kings of India who out of fear or necessity fostered the foreigners. Finally Perseus symbolically represents the dynamic and a leader like Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, the freedom fighter whose deliverance is eagerly awaited by the enslaved masses of the country under the British rule in those days.

Thus, Sri. Aurobindo had a definite nationalistic purpose in the use of Perseus Andromeda myth in the play. He wants to arouse his country men from the fear of the British, incite the spirit of patriotism in their mind, fight against the foreigners and try to drive them out of his country.

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