

Mythical Quest in the Cross-Cultural Narratives

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The origin of myths lies in the creative bond between the human imagination and the mysterious natural phenomena. These beautiful imaginative tales stem from the belief system of our primitive forefathers whose curiosity to understand and explain the natural world in terms of the supernatural, resulted in the stories known as myths, “It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth” (Campbell). These imaginative and creative interpretations were handed down from one generation to another orally, and later, in written form. Initial myths were generally the stories of divine beings signifying some spiritual meaning or truth. Throughout history, mythology and folklore have served as rich sources of inspiration for artists, offering a treasure trove of narratives, symbols, and themes to explore and reinterpret. These timeless stories and legends, passed down through generations, reflect the collective wisdom, values, and cultural heritage of societies. By incorporating elements of mythology and folklore into their work, artists can convey universal themes and connect with audiences on a deep, emotional level.

Although, there are various types of traditional tales which scholars and researchers of mythology have classified in different ways, still, all these classifications of legends, folk tales, and sagas revolve around the story of a heroic figure facing and winning the battle of life. This mythical hero embodies the universal character of humanity, who accepts the natural and supernatural challenges and comes out victorious with some

moral significance or general truth for the betterment of human culture and conscience. These historic and imaginative records of human experience have a general thesis that can be traced in the stories of all cultures and histories, as Jungian psychology explicates this general thesis as: “In fact, the whole of mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious” (Jung 325). A story, depicting the creation, order, and evolution of a tribe or culture, entails several elements and traits resembling with the endless stock of myths across cultures and ages. One of the most common archetypes found in literature is that of ‘quest’. A quest is a journey in which one advances spiritually and mentally along with travelling physically. The quest comes out of the familiar and moves into the unknown. The nature of the goal may not be clear at first and may only become apparent at the end of the quest.

The narrative of quest has played a prominent role in folklores and myths, and appears in literature of all ages. Bible’s Fisher King’s quest for the Holy Grail is perhaps the first ‘quest’ narrative in the canon. Many quest narratives are interwoven with the grail— a miraculous cup providing eternal happiness. The Grail first appears in 1190, in a romance *Perceval, le Conte du Graal*, by Chretien de Froyes. Later, the narrative continues in the medieval chivalric romance *Le Morte d’ Arthur* (1470) by Thomas Mallory. T.S. Eliot, in his ambitious work, *The Wasteland* (1922) again revived the Fisher King legend by mixing it with the Celtic tale of lifting up the curse of a barren land by a hero’s retrieval of the grail. The quest for the Holy Grail appears significantly in Arthurian literature. Jessie Weston, in her book, *From Ritual to Romance* (1922) examines the roots of the Holy Grail tradition in King Arthur legends. Considering the Holy Grail narrative as a literary outgrowth of the ancient ritual, she explores the Celtic, Christian and Gnostic versions and interpretations of the Grail saga particularly in terms of the ‘Wasteland’ motif which depicts a king’s quest for fertility and for mystical oneness with God.

Thomas Mallory's, *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1470), reinterprets the existing French- English tales about the legendary hero King Arthur, and his knights of the round table. In his sixth book titled *The Noble Tale of the Sangreal* (1485). Mallory records King Arthur and his Knight's adventurous quest to reach to the Holy Grail. Sir Gawain, Lancelot, Percival, Bors and Galahad undergo many trials and ordeals encountering maidens and hermits as their mentors. Galahad, the only sin-less knight, fulfils his quest and achieves the Holy Grail, signifying the victory of moral perfection over chivalry.

Homer's epic poem *Odyssey* is the oldest surviving example of the secular quest narratives. Odysseus' quest is different in the sense that instead of going out for the unknown, the hero's journey is concerned with 'homecoming'. As the quest narrative is one of the oldest universal ways of telling stories, specially an heroic one, Homer records Odysseus' adventurous journey from the fields of Troy to his kingdom of Ithaca following the conventions of a quest narrative. The quest continues even after the homecoming, where Odysseus has to defeat the hundred and eight young men who invade his house to marry his wife Penelope. The problem is resolved by a contest of arrows in which Odysseus and his son Telemachus kill all the suitors. Through the supernatural intervention of the Goddess of wisdom and victory, Athena, peace and prosperity are restored eventually to the island of Ithaca. This road of trials includes monsters, cannibals, temptresses, and Gods and demons themselves. The rich well of mythical illusions in *Odyssey* makes it a milestone giving way to a variety of literary perspectives to the future quest narratives. The Roman name of Odysseus, i.e. Ulysses, has become an emblem of the unyielding, incessant adventurous spirit of humanity, told and retold by many artists and writers across the world.

Virgil's epic poem *Aeneid*, written between 29–19 BC, tells the legend of Aeneas, a character from Homer's *Iliad* who links the legend of Troy to Rome by finding the glorious Roman Empire. Beginning his poem with an invocation of the muse, Virgil states the theme of his ambitious work, "of arms and the man I sing" (1). Recounting Aeneas' wanderings and challenges to establish a new empire for the Trojan

people, Virgil pays a tribute to his patron, Augustus Caesar by creating an epic for common people. Making a sharp contrast with Odysseus, Aeneas begins a selfless journey following the will of God. Overcoming all the hurdles and temptations along the long *interior* and exterior journey, he emerges as a selfless patriot by obeying the will of God. Following the conventions of a heroic epic, the poem perfectly fits into the structure of the archetypal quest narrative. The noble goal of establishing a city for his people, the supernatural aid, the trial and ordeals of the soul, a journey to the underworld, the villainy of Goddess Juno, the woman of dreams- widow Dido, the wars and battles, and the founding of the Roman Empire qualify Aeneas as a questor who fought for the Roman ideals of Pietas- a selfless sense of national, social, and moral obligations.

The soul's journey after death, through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven is allegorically narrated in Dante's narrative poem *Divine comedy* (1308–1321). In *Divine Comedy*, Dante captures the spiritual journey towards God. The three parts of the book describe the pilgrim Dante's quest for divine justice which is explained in terms of sin, purgation, and enlightenment. In this quest narrative the pilgrim's soul is accompanied by the three mentors: Beatrice, representing the divine revelation, Virgil, representing the human reason, and Saint Bernard, representing devotion. While Virgil and Saint Bernard guide him through hell and purgatory, Beatrice, Dante's ideal woman, guides him through heaven.

The spiritual quest to fulfillment in the superhuman world has been the key theme in almost all the classic epics in literature, though, Dante's vision is shaped by the Catholic theology, his concepts of birth, rebirth, hell and heaven, the passage to salvation, the divine guidance, and God, are more universal than Christian. The individual soul lost in the dark of the woods (sins) meets a guide who guides it by his reason and wisdom. Here the mentor Virgil after guiding him through hell to the top of Mount Purgatory tells the pilgrim that he (human wisdom and reason) cannot accompany him to the eternal height of heaven. When the human wisdom falters, Dante's beloved, the divine love comes to the soul's rescue and leads it to heaven.

In *Joseph Andrews* (1742), the first major novel in the English language, Henry Fielding records the adventures of a good-natured footman, Joseph Andrews with his mentor- Abraham Adams. Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759) narrates prince of Abyssinia's journey to happiness. Coleridge's long narrative poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) also falls into the category of soul's journey to the sublime through suffering and repentance. In Herman Melville's adventure novel, *Moby Dick* (1851), the protagonist Ishmael wrestles with the spiritual and philosophical transformation. Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1902) can be seen as a quest narrative for relating Marlow's mythical journey in search of mysteries of existence journeying up the Congo River. Hermann Hesse's novel, *Siddhartha* (1922) chronicles Siddhartha's quest to conquer suffering and fear. Quest archetype is prominent in modern adventure fiction too. J.R.R Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) series, that have become the all-time classics in Hollywood movies too, also fall into the category of adventure quest narrative.

In this way 'Quest' continued in modern fiction too. The Hero's Journey, a narrative pattern identified by Joseph Campbell, is one of the most influential storytelling structures derived from mythology. This monomyth involves stages such as the Call to Adventure, the Road of Trials, the Ultimate Boon, and the Return with Elixir. Campbell's work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), illustrates how this structure appears in myths across cultures and time periods. Modern storytellers frequently employ the Hero's Journey to craft compelling narratives. For instance, in Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), the protagonist Shiva follows this archetypal path as he transforms from a tribal leader to a revered deity. Similarly, in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), the retelling of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective follows her journey of struggle, power, and self-discovery. Hence, the mythical quest framework continues to be adapted in modern

storytelling. The *Star Wars* saga, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Lion King* all follow the pattern of a hero leaving home, facing trials, and returning transformed. These retellings demonstrate the enduring power of the mythical quest to capture universal human experiences.

Thus, the study provides adequate insight into the idea of a universal mythical quest and its representation in world literatures. The narrative of a hero, the quester, who undertakes a journey to accomplish a great deed for either some personal or some humanitarian gain, has found an ample space in the literatures of all cultures and times.

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