



The Role of Myth and History in Indian Novels in English

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Abstract:

The present paper highlights The Role of Myth and History in Indian Novels in English. Indian English fiction often weaves together threads of myth and history to create narratives that are both culturally rooted and politically reflective. This article explores how Indian authors employ mythology and historical events not merely as backdrops, but as powerful tools to comment on identity, tradition, gender, and postcolonial realities. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reimagine epic tales and historical moments to challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative perspectives. The blurring of myth and history enables these authors to craft stories that question linear time, subvert colonial discourse, and reassert indigenous knowledge systems. By examining select texts, this study highlights the thematic and aesthetic significance of myth-history interplay in shaping Indian English literature and contributing to a deeper understanding of India's socio-cultural complexity. Indian Writing in English often blends mythological narratives and historical contexts to explore identity, culture, and politics. This article could examine how writers use mythology and history not just for storytelling, but to critique colonialism, reinterpret tradition, and question modernity.

Keywords: Mythological Reinterpretation, Indigenous Knowledge, Gender and Tradition, Literary Hybridity, Epic Narratives, Alternative Histories

**Introduction:**

Indian Writing in English is a vibrant literary tradition that often draws upon the rich reservoir of myths and the complex layers of Indian history to shape its narratives. Far from being mere backdrops, mythology and history are frequently reinterpreted and reimagined by writers to engage with contemporary concerns such as identity, politics, gender, and postcolonial resistance. By weaving together, the mythical and the historical, authors construct layered stories that resonate with both timelessness and urgency. This fusion allows for a deeper exploration of India's cultural memory and socio-political realities, offering readers fresh perspectives on familiar tales and forgotten pasts. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni use this interplay to question dominant narratives, challenge historical silences, and recover indigenous voices. This article examines how such intertextual strategies enrich Indian English fiction and contribute to its unique narrative power.

Mythology as a Narrative Tool:

In Indian culture, myths are more than mere stories; they are moral, spiritual, and cultural codes deeply embedded in everyday life. Modern Indian English writers often revisit these myths not to repeat them, but to reinterpret them from new perspectives. One of the most compelling examples is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, a retelling of the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's point of view. By giving voice to a traditionally silenced female character, Divakaruni reclaims the epic narrative through a feminist lens, thus interrogating patriarchal structures embedded in ancient stories.

Similarly, Devdutt Pattanaik and Anand Neelakantan have contributed significantly to the genre of mytho-fiction by reimagining the stories of villains and marginalized characters



from Indian epics. These retellings not only subvert conventional understandings but also offer nuanced insights into contemporary issues such as gender roles, morality, and power dynamics.

Historical Fiction and the Nation's Past:

While mythology delves into the symbolic past, historical fiction engages with tangible events that have shaped the nation. Writers like Amitav Ghosh use history as a canvas to explore colonial encounters, global trade, migration, and environmental crises. His *Ibis Trilogy*—*Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*—is a monumental narrative that examines the opium trade between India and China under British imperial rule. Ghosh's detailed historical research, blended with fictional characters, paints a vivid picture of the socio-political realities of 19th-century colonialism.

Another significant example is Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, which captures the trauma and human tragedy of the Partition of India in 1947. Through deeply personal and emotional narratives, Singh transforms a historical event into a universal story of loss, displacement, and survival. Historical novels like these serve as alternative records of history, often highlighting the voices and experiences that official histories tend to overlook.

The Fusion of Myth and History:

Perhaps the most revolutionary literary strategy is the blending of myth and history into a single narrative fabric. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a prime example, where the protagonist Saleem Sinai's life is mystically tied to the birth of the Indian nation. The novel combines elements of magical realism, mythic symbolism, and political history to create a fantastical yet poignant commentary on post-independence India. Rushdie challenges linear notions of time and truth, suggesting that personal memory, myth, and official history are all constructs open to reinterpretation.



This fusion technique is also evident in the works of Githa Hariharan, particularly in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, where she juxtaposes mythological stories with the lived experiences of modern Indian women. By doing so, she draws parallels between the struggles of contemporary characters and those found in ancient epics, suggesting that the past continues to echo in the present.

Themes and Significance:

The use of myth and history in Indian English fiction serves multiple thematic purposes. Firstly, it becomes a means of reclaiming identity—be it cultural, national, or personal. In postcolonial India, where colonial history often suppressed native narratives, the retelling of myths and local histories acts as a form of resistance. Secondly, these narratives provide commentary on contemporary issues such as gender inequality, caste oppression, religious conflict, and political corruption. By invoking familiar myths and historical events, writers make these issues more relatable and rooted in the Indian ethos.

Furthermore, the blending of myth and history allows for a more inclusive and pluralistic narrative structure. It opens space for marginalized voices—women, Dalits, the queer community, and regional cultures—thus enriching the literary landscape. In Indian English fiction, the interweaving of myth and history is not merely a stylistic choice but a profound narrative strategy. It allows writers to interrogate the past, engage with the present, and imagine the future. By revisiting and reinterpreting epics and historical events, authors challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative visions of reality. Whether through the fantastical realms of mythology or the harsh truths of history, these novels reflect the complexities of Indian society and contribute to a deeper understanding of its cultural identity.



As this literary tradition continues to evolve, the interplay of myth and history will remain central to its power and appeal.

Main Thrust:

The central argument of this article is that Indian novels in English use the fusion of myth and history not merely as literary devices but as powerful tools to explore and critique socio-political realities, reclaim marginalized identities, and reinterpret cultural memory. By blending the symbolic depth of mythology with the factual grounding of history, writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni construct layered narratives that challenge colonial discourse, gender norms, and linear historical perspectives. This interplay enriches Indian English fiction and offers a pluralistic, reflective understanding of Indian identity and nationhood.

At the heart of Indian Writing in English lies a unique literary strategy—the dynamic fusion of myth and history—that distinguishes it from other postcolonial literatures. The central thrust of this essay is that Indian English novelists deliberately employ this fusion not simply for aesthetic appeal, but as a powerful narrative device to explore complex themes of identity, resistance, cultural continuity, and socio-political critique.

India's civilizational depth, marked by a long tradition of oral storytelling, epics, and colonial encounters, has created a layered collective consciousness where myth and history are not seen as opposing forces but as interdependent strands of cultural reality. Indian English writers tap into this continuum, using myths to symbolically represent universal truths, and history to ground their narratives in lived experiences. This dual engagement enables them to question dominant historical narratives while simultaneously preserving and reshaping indigenous knowledge systems.



One of the most significant aspects of this fusion is its use as a form of resistance against colonial and postcolonial hegemonies. Colonialism attempted to delegitimize native traditions and rewrite Indian history through a Western lens. In response, many Indian writers use myth as a counter-discursive tool, reclaiming ancient tales and reshaping them to reflect modern sensibilities and resist cultural erasure. For instance, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* reimagines the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's point of view, challenging both the patriarchal interpretations of mythology and the colonial perception of Indian women as passive figures. Here, myth becomes a feminist statement, and the personal becomes political.

Similarly, historical fiction in Indian English writing is rarely confined to recreating past events; instead, it often aims to fill the gaps left by official historiography, focusing on the lives of those marginalized or silenced in mainstream history. Writers like Amitav Ghosh, in his *Ibis Trilogy*, portray the socio-economic dynamics of colonial trade and migration, uncovering the interlinked histories of India, China, and the West through fictional characters grounded in real historical contexts. Ghosh's narratives go beyond Eurocentric historical models to emphasize India's role in global history, often overlooked in traditional narratives.

What makes Indian English fiction distinctive is its willingness to blur the lines between the mythical and the historical. The works of Salman Rushdie epitomize this strategy. In *Midnight's Children*, history and fantasy coexist: the protagonist Saleem Sinai's personal story is inextricably linked with the fate of post-independence India. Saleem's body becomes a metaphor for the nation itself—fragmented, confused, yet full of potential. The novel uses magical realism to reinterpret both historical trauma and national identity, suggesting that history is not just a linear sequence of events but a malleable, interpretive process intertwined with memory, myth, and imagination.



This myth-history blend serves another important function—it validates the multiplicity and plurality of Indian culture. In a country where history is often contested and mythologies vary across regions, such narratives embrace complexity rather than homogenization. This pluralistic vision reflects India's fragmented yet cohesive identity, allowing authors to explore the fluid boundaries between truth and belief, fact and fiction, past and present.

Moreover, this narrative strategy is also used to address contemporary social issues such as gender, caste, diaspora, and ecological crises. In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh combines the myth of Bon Bibi (a local goddess of the Sundarbans) with ecological and migration histories, creating a narrative that connects mythic belief systems with present-day environmental and humanitarian concerns. Similarly, *The Thousand Faces of Night* by Githa Hariharan blends mythical stories of women from epics with the modern-day struggles of Indian women, reinforcing the idea that ancient narratives continue to shape present realities.

The central thrust, therefore, is that the fusion of myth and history in Indian English novels functions as a multidimensional tool—aesthetic, ideological, and political. It allows writers to:

1. Challenge colonial and patriarchal narratives;
2. Reclaim silenced histories and marginalized voices;
3. Explore the evolving nature of Indian identity in a globalized world;
4. Reflect on contemporary issues through timeless symbols;
5. Create a literary form that is both rooted and experimental.

This interplay does not merely decorate the narrative but serves as a core structuring principle, transforming storytelling into a means of cultural negotiation and intellectual



resistance. Through this, Indian English novelists not only preserve cultural heritage but also reimagine it, ensuring that the tradition evolves with relevance in the modern world.

In conclusion, the main thrust of Indian English fiction's use of myth and history is to construct a narrative space where the past is not static, but dynamic—capable of critique, renewal, and reinterpretation. Whether through mythical reimagining's or historical reconstructions, these narratives strive to offer a deeper, more inclusive understanding of India's pluralistic identity, making them an essential part of global postcolonial literature.

Conclusion:

The fusion of myth and history in Indian novels in English is not merely a stylistic device but a profound narrative strategy that shapes the thematic and ideological core of the literature. By drawing from ancient epics and historical events, Indian writers reconstruct cultural memory and challenge dominant narratives—colonial, patriarchal, and official. This blending enables authors to explore deep questions of identity, nationhood, gender, and social justice, offering stories that resonate with both timeless wisdom and urgent contemporary relevance.

Writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Githa Hariharan demonstrate that myth and history are not confined to the past—they live in the present and influence the future. Through these interwoven narratives, Indian English fiction becomes a space of dialogue between tradition and modernity, belief and critique, memory and imagination. In doing so, it not only enriches global literature but also affirms the complexity, resilience, and diversity of the Indian experience.



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