

## Myths and Modernity in AmulyaMalladi's Novels

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### Abstract

Literature is a process of widening mythology. In the modern version, literary works reconstruct and recreate ancient tales. The terms "myth" and "modernity" refer to diametrically opposed concepts. Even in modern digital days, mythology amazes, charms, and empowers the Indian novels. They have seen a dramatic shift in practically all sectors of life, particularly in the twenty-first century. In truth, it has been through a generational shift. Despite our transition to colonial attire, modern men still take the time to read and write about man's origin and culture. Indo American writers are influenced by mythology passed on to future from ancient times, attempting to maintain cultural identity and religious practices. Though AmulyaMalladi settles herself in California, still she likes to write about the ancient Hindu mythological stories in a modernised way. The present paper is a study on the selected novels of Amulya which include *A Breath of Fresh Air*, *The Mango Season*, *Song of the Cuckoo Bird*, and *The Copenhagen Affair*. Malladi's novels integrate the greatest epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In some of her novels, she retells epic scenes, while in others, she reconstructs epic scenes. The ancient mythical story of Arundhadhi relates about the equal status of women in the Vedic period and how that status has vanished in current times. Malladi compares the wars of ancient India and the civil war in America. It also discusses how the *The Copenhagen Affairs* recreates the modern version of the *Ramayana*.

**Keywords:** Intuitive, decentralized government, constellation, reiterated

Indian writers are always fascinated by the Indian mythological stories and construct the novels with mythological stories. Novels written by the first-generation Indo-Americans are unique and creative. The novel also discuss the societal and cultural shifts from ancient period to the modern period. Pattanaik opines "But there are many types of truth. Some objective, some subjective, some logical, some intuitive, some cultural, some universal. Some are based on evidence; others depend on faith. Myth is truth which is subjective, intuitive, cultural and grounded in faith." (1) In the case of the re-construction of existing myths, the apparent features embodied within the original myth are investigated, resisted, replaced, denied, inverted, or re-focused.

*The Mahabharata* is one of the most powerful and reliable sources to influence the imagination and creative thinking of Indian writers. *The Ramayana* discusses the true identity of the individual, the true value of the family, and the sacredness of society. It emphasises the human values. Reddy says "Human values are reiterated in the Indian tradition from the times of Vedas, *The Upanishads*, *the Gita*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* emphasize the more values in their discussion." (280) *The Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata* are two of India's major epics that inspire Hindu thoughts and belief. The two epics are thought to be based on actual occurrences and are known as *itihasa* in Sanskrit, which means "historical texts."

AmulyaMalladi was born in Madhya Pradesh in India in the 1974. She was born in a Hindu family and spent her adolescence and youth-hood in India. Malladi has established herself as a prolific writer who retells Indian epics and tales in her writings. Her novels, such as *A Breath of Fresh Air*, *The Mango Season*, *Song of the Cuckoo Bird*, and *The Copenhagen Affair*, are remarkable works that alternately retell and recreate Indian mythological tales.

All Malladi's novels feature strong female characters with admirable qualities. Priya of the *The Mango Season* has the finest qualities of mankind like honesty, inner strength, divinity, and practicality. She enjoys her life with passion and confidence in dangerous and risky circumstances. Priya is worried about the ill-treatment of her aunt Neelima in her maternal mother's home. When Priya complains about this to Anand, he is not concerned about it. Anand asks Priya to see Saptarishi in order to divert her attention away from that subject. The term

"Saptarishi" is a Sanskrit word which means "seven sages." These are seven saints who have lived in ancient India. It is believed that saptarishis are created by the vision of the Lord Brahma. Malladi says,

They were learned beings to whom the Vedas has been revealed and they represented the seven powers of life and consciousness in all of God's creation. The seven rishis were married to very nice-looking women and once when they were performing a *yajna*, Agni, the God of fire, saw the women and immediately fell in lust with them. Agni's then-girlfriend, Svaha, wanted to please her lover and took the form of all the rishis's wives in bed. (MS 123)

Arundhati is the wife of Vasishtha, one of the seven sages, Saptarshi. She is a wonderful wife. Svaha is unable to transform her body into that of Arundhati. Except Arundhati, all other wives of sages are driven out from their homes. Arundhati and her husband are said to have become stars after their mortal lives. They are mentioned in the epics. Despite being a wife of one of the seven sages, she is treated equal with them. Arundhati is a personification of several virtues, including adoration, modesty, and marital pleasure, as mentioned in Vedic and Puranic literature. Arundhati is given a special position in the epic *the Mahabharata*, sharing equal status with the seven sages. According to the epic, Svaha, Agni's wife, could take the form of the wives of all six sages of Saptarshi mandala, except Sage Vasishtha's wife, Arundhati. In his story to Priya, Anand compares Arundhati to Neelima. He expects his wife to inherit Arundhati's virtues, but he ignores when his family members violate her equality.

Arundhati and Vasistha are regarded as the ideal couple, representing marital accomplishment and dedication. During the Brahmin marriage ceremony, so many rituals are followed. In one of the rituals the bride-groom shows his bride the double stars of Arundhadhti and Vasistha glittering in the sky. In some Hindu communities, priests performing wedding ceremonies make reference to or figure out the constellation of stars as a symbol of the closeness which marriage brings to a couple. In the past Indian women held a higher social status. *The Mahabharata* and other *puranas* mention the name of the Arundhadhi first before her husband's name. Women were held in higher regard than men. After narrating the mythological story of Arundhadhi, Anand asks Priya, "And now you can see her?" (TMS 123) By explaining, this story of Arundhadhi, Malladi shows the status of Indian women in the past. In the Vedic period, women had equal status with men but in the modern age the status is reversed. Priya's aunt Neelima is well educated but is ill-treated in her mother-in-law's house because her mother tongue is different from her-in-laws.

In Malladi's *Song of the Cuckoo Bird*, Kokila, the protagonist was called by the name Vidura. Malladi says "Ramanandam named his son Vidura, for the great wise man from *The Mahabharata* who narrated the entire battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas to the blind king, Dhritrastra." (Scb9) He is one of the wise characters in the *Mahabharata*. He is an incarnation of Lord Dharmaraja and always takes the side of *dharma*. Throughout *the Mahabharata*, Vidura plays an important role. He constantly warns and advises Dhritrastra to be more gentle with Pandavas. He represents righteousness in this novel as well. When Kokila refuses to go to her mother-in-law's house, Vidura compels her to go. When Vidura's father Ramanadam and sister Charvi use the religion to victimize the innocent believers, it is Vidura who resists their tyranny.

In another incident, Charvi, the guru of *TellaMeda*, informs Mark, the American, about the epic battle between *pandavas* and *kauravas* the cousins from the *Mahabharata*. Mark comes to *TellaMeda* as a guest and to finish his photography project. Mark narrates the American Civil War while listening to a story from the epic *the Mahabharata* about a great battle. The battle in the *Mahabharata* is compared with the American Civil War by Mark. When Charvi says the *Mahabharata* is about a battle between a hundred *Kaurava* brothers and five *Pandava* brothers, Mark responds that the American civil war is about a conflict between North and South America. *The Mahabharata* is a tale of good versus evil, with the *Kauravas* representing evil and the *Pandavas* representing good. In this context Elgar comments,

These epics are often described as representing the battle between good and evil, but in general, good and evil are understood as relative terms. Hinduism does not construe an absolute good or evil: theodicy has not been an issue in Hindu thought. Instead these illustrate what the Hindu tradition sees as central human tension: choosing to fulfil one's dharma vs. karma, or desire. (83).

American civil war is also a war between the good and the evil, where North America invest in factories and railroads, South Americans invest their money in slaves. Mark says, "The South wanted to protect its cotton industry and wanted a decentralized government and free trade. The North was more industrial and didn't

believe in a decentralized government because that would mean loss of tax income from the wealthy south.”(scb 55)Charvi speaks passionately as she wants to show off her knowledge in Indian mythology and American political scenario. Malladi rescripts mythology to teach moral lessons and explain historical events.

Every Sunday, most of the devotees at *TellaMeda*, including the hermitage's head, Charvi, gather to watch the *Ramayana* on television. Despite the fact that devotees are asked to arrive at TellaMeda after ten o'clock in the morning, and the cooks are given enough time to prepare the food after watching the *Ramayana*. Bhanu, who regards the *Ramayana* as the epic of virtues, asks Kokila, “Even you watch it.”(Scb246) Bhanu is Chetana's child, and he resides in TellaMeda with Renuka. Bhanu asks the protagonist Kokila this question in order to start a fight with her. Kokila's illegitimate relationship with a fatherly figure leads her to act in this manner. Bhanu indicates that the epic the *Ramayana* is solely for noble ladies and not for those who have immoral attitudes.

Malladi depicts a scene from the greatest epic, the *Ramayana*, in her novel *A Breath of Fresh Air*. Vijayadashami, also known as Dussehra, is a major Hindu festival celebrated at the end of *Navaratri* each year. Anjali, the protagonist, after divorcing her first husband, marries her second husband, Sandeep, against her parents' wishes. Her mother constantly tells her that she should not have divorced her first husband. Her mother is dissatisfied with Anjali's middle-class lifestyle, which she shares with Sandeep. When Anjali and her mother are outside in the ground to see Lord Ravana's incarnation, they have a furious argument. Anjali says, “We found a nice spot to watch the effigy of Ravana burn with the flames from arrows shot by young men standing below. Torn from the pages of the great epic *Ramayana*, it was the age-old story of good versus evil.” (BFA 120)

*The Copenhagen Affair* is a modern retelling of the epic *the Ramayana*. *The Ramayana* has been universally recognised as a marvellous work of literary endeavour that depicts human behaviour, ways of thinking, ideas, attitudes, and imagination. The Danish in Ravn is derived from the raven bird. Ravan is a villain in Hindu mythology. Sita in Hindu mythology is depicted as the noblest woman of India. She remains true to her husband through her words and deeds in spite of the numerous trials and tribulations she undergoes. Sita, the perfect wife patiently bears the agonies and performs her duty to her husband. Mohanty says “She is believed to represent the perceived quality of ideal womanhood limited to the role of a self-sacrificing wife and mother, and who unquestioningly submits to the Brahmanical dictums of trials and tribulations by fire to prove her purity.”(n.p) Malladi presents modern version of Sita with the modernised name of Sanya. Sanya never remains true to her husband in thoughts and actions. When Ravn abducts her, Sanya rejoices it and neglects to go back with her husband. Sanya falls in love with Ander Ravn and novelist says, “It was a romantic gateway. The conversation flowed easily between them like they were familiar lovers; the magic between them stayed alive despite her betrayal of him.”(CA276) Anjali is purely happy with the life of Sandeep. Malladi indirectly portrays the struggle between the good and the evil in the life of Anjali and finally her mental life with second husband ends up with happy note.

Rama is viewed as a paradigm of logic, proper action, and desirable virtues. Malladi's Rama, Harry, serves as a paradigm of irrational, wrongdoing, and with lack of qualities. When Sanya is sick, he never cares her properly. When Sita is kidnapped and tormented by Ravana in the *Ramayana*, Rama refuses to accept her as his wife again. However, Sanya's husband, Harry, begs her to be his wife once more. Women are portrayed as powerless objects in *The Ramayana*, falling victim to men's manipulation as the text portrays a false empowerment of women, whereas Malladi portrays women as independent and without any false empowerment.

Malladi uses traditional mythology to address contemporary issues by reinterpreting the past in the light of the present. It is no doubt that Malladi's novels picture generational changes in the current time. In her own writings, she relates the stories of Arundhadhi, the feud between the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas*, the qualities of Sita, and the modern version of the *Ramayana*. She also raises concerns about the patriarchal taint in the old legends. Malladi also tells stories with new twists and turns.

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