

**Tribhuvan University**

Myth in Laxmi Prasad Devkota's *Shakuntala*

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Approval Letter

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## Abstract

Myth is the central issue in Laxmi Prasad Devkota's *Shakuntala*. Shakuntala, the main character of the epic, represents the Hindu women, faces a lot of difficulties and hardships in her life due to the curse of sage Durbasha. The whole epic moves within the circle of Shakuntala, her husband Dushyanta and son Bharat who are the central characters of the epic. The whole myth is about ancient Hindu society culture and religion that is related with historical subject matter.

Shakuntala is the daughter of sage Vishwamitra and nymph Menaka who is born in the jungle and left alone due to the separation of her parents from each other. Kanva Rishi finds her sleeping in the jungle and takes her to his hut. The childless couple of Kanva Rishi keep her as their daughter with great affection. After gandharba marriage with king Dushyanta, Shakuntala is left alone by her husband in the promise of returning back after the fight against enemies. But the time is against her favor and the king Dushyanta forgets her due to the curse that happens in her life. Later, Shakuntala and her mother Gautami go to the palace of the king but Dushyanta rejects her and she is driven to the sage Kashyap's hermitage by her mother Menaka from heaven. Shakuntala gives birth to a male child named Bharat. Besides, the king Dushyanta is summoned by Lord Indra to fight against the demon, Kalanemis on behalf of the gods. After returning back from heaven, he goes to the forest in search of his wife Shakuntala and finds his son Bharat and wife Shakuntala there. The epic ends in the happy reunion of the family.

## Contents

Approval Letter	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Abstract	iv
Chapter 1: Myth, Hindu Myths and their Implications	1-14
Chapter 2: Mythological Criticism of Levi-Strauss	15-29
Chapter 3: Myth in Laxmi Prasad Devkota's <i>Shakuntala</i>	30-47
Chapter 4: Conclusion: <i>Shakuntala</i> as a Hindu Myth	48-49
Works Cited	

## Chapter 1

### Myth, Hindu Myths and their Implications

In the academic fields of mythology, mythography or folkloristic, a myth is a sacred story concerning the origin of the world, or how the world and the creatures in it came to have their present form, although, in a very broad sense, the word 'myth' can refer to any traditional story. The active beings in the myths are generally Gods and Heroes. Myths are often said to take place before the recorded history begins. In saying that a myth is a sacred narrative, what is meant is that a myth is believed to be true by the people who attach religious and spiritual significance to it. The main characters in the myths are usually gods, supernatural heroes and humans. As sacred stories, myths are often endorsed by rulers and priests and closely linked to religion or spirituality. In the society in which it is told, a myth is usually regarded as a true account of the remote past. In fact, many societies have two categories of traditional narrative, true stories or myths, and false stories or fables. Creation myths generally take place in a primordial age, when the world had not yet achieved its current form and explain how the world gained its current form and how customs, institutions and taboos were established.

Closely related to myth are legend and folk tale. Myths, legends and folk tales are different types of traditional story. Bascom compares folk tales and legends with myths thus:

Unlike myths, folk tales can be set in anytime and any place, and they are not considered true or sacred by the societies that tell them. Like myths, legends are stories that are traditionally considered true, but are set in a more recent time, when the world was much as it is today.

Legends generally feature humans as their main characters, whereas myths generally focus on superhuman characters. (9)

The distinction between myth, legend and folk tale is meant simply as a useful tool for grouping traditional stories. In many cultures, it is hard to draw a sharp line between myths and legends. Instead of dividing their traditional stories into myths, legends and folktales, some cultures divide them into two categories, one that roughly corresponds to folk tales and one that combines myths and legends. Even myths and folk tales are not completely distinct. A story may be considered true (and therefore a mythos) in one society, but considered fictional (and therefore a folk tale) in another society. In fact, when a myth loses its status as part of a religious system, it often takes on traits more typical of folktales, with its formerly divine characters reinterpreted as human heroes, giants or fairies.

One theory claims that myths are distorted accounts of real historical events. Accordingly to this theory, storytellers repeatedly elaborated upon historical accounts until the figures in those accounts gained the status of gods. According to Grosby, “Every nation has its distinctive past that is conveyed through stories, myths and legendary personalities” (8). Levi-Strauss defines myth as:

On the one hand, a myth always refers to the events alleged to have taken place a long time ago. But what gives the myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless; it explains the present and the past as well as the future. (209)

Myths that are based on historical events over times become imbued with symbolic meaning, transformed, shifted in ‘myths’ as lying at the far end of a continuum ranging from a ‘dispassionate account’ to ‘legendary occurrence’ to ‘mythical status’. As an event progress towards the mythical ends of this continuum, what people think,

feel and say about the event takes on progressively greater historical significance while the fact becomes less important. By the time one reaches to mythical end of the spectrum, the story has taken on a life of its own and the facts of the original event have become almost irrelevant.

According to the myth-ritual theory, the existence of myth is tied to ritual. In its most extreme form, this theory claims that myth arose to explain rituals. In the book *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* the biblical scholar William Robertson Smith correlates myths to rituals like this:

people begin performing rituals for some reason that is not related to myth; later, after they have forgotten the original reason for a ritual, they try to account for the ritual by inventing a myth and claiming that the ritual commemorates the events described in that myth. (qtd. in Segal 63)

The anthropologist James Frazer emphasizes magical rituals in myths. He says, “Primitive man starts out with a belief in magical laws; later, when man begins to lose faith in magic, he invents myths about gods and claims that his formerly magical rituals are religious rituals intended to appease the gods” (711). Frazer saw myths as a misinterpretation of magical ritual; which were based on a mistaken idea of natural law.

Myth critic Northrop Frye points out that all literary genres are initially “derived from” and thus variations on the quest –myth. Further he defines myth as:

All myths are basically concerned, that is, with some kind of quest to accomplish some sort of goal. Each genre gestures towards a particular kind of human quest, that is, one involving the protagonist in a specific pattern of action. In other words, the hero may triumph (comedy), fail



or be killed (tragedy), be reborn (romance) and / or be the object of criticism rather than adulation (satire). Each pattern of actions and thus each genre are traceable and thus correspond to a particular cycle, especially of the seasons: comedy-summer/midday; tragedy-autumn/dusk; satire-winter/night; and romance-spring/morning. (511)

There are two basic categories in Frye's framework, comedic and tragic. Each category is further sub-divided into two categories: comedy and romance for the comedic; tragedy and satire for the tragic. Frye uses the seasons in his archetypal schema. Each season is aligned with a literary genre: comedy with spring, romance with summer, tragedy with autumn, and satire with winter. For Frye, literary archetypes "play an essential role in refashioning the material universe into an alternative verbal universe that is humanly intelligible and viable, because it is adapted to essential human needs and concerns" (Abrams 224-25).

Generally myths are the components or aspects of religion. So religion is solely made up of the components of mythical aspects. A given myth is almost always associated with a certain religion, such as Greek mythology with ancient Greek religion and the Old Testament of the *Bible* with Christianity. Disconnected from its religious system a myth may lose its immediate relevance to the community and evolve-away from sacred importance-into a legend or folk tale. Lauri Honko asserts that, "in some cases, a society will reenact a myth in an attempt to reproduce the conditions of the mythical age" (49). For example, it will reenact the healing performed by a god at the beginning of the time in order to heal someone in the present. By folklorists' definition, all myths are religious or sacred stories, but not all stories are myths; religious stories that involve the creation of the world are myths.

Mircea Eliade argues that, “one of the foremost functions of myth is to establish models for behavior and that myth may also provide a religious experience” (8). Further she argued, “By telling or reenacting myths, members of traditional societies detach themselves from the present and return to the mythical age, thereby bringing themselves closer to the divine” (19). Levi-Strauss believes that mythology has been one of the sub-field of “religious anthropology.” According to him:

Myths are still widely interpreted in conflicting ways as collective dreams, as the outcome of a kind of esthetic play, or as the basis of ritual. Mythological figures are considered as personified abstractions, divinized heroes, or fallen gods. Whatever the hypothesis, the choice amounts to reducing mythology either to idle play or to a crude kind of philosophic speculation. (207)

Levi-Strauss finds the conflicts in the definition of myth. In his view, mythological figures are considered as divinized heroes or fallen gods. Mythology is related to religion and it is the sub-field of religious anthropology. In fact it is reducing to a crude kind of philosophic speculation.

The first scholarly theories of myth appeared during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In general, these 19<sup>th</sup> centuries theories framed myth as a failed and obsolete mode of thought, often be interpreting myth as the primitive counterpart of modern science. E.B. Taylor in the book *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* defines that, “myth as an attempt at a literal explanation for natural phenomena: unable to conceive of impersonal natural laws, early man tried to explain natural phenomena by attributing souls to inanimate objects, giving rise to animism”(qtd. in Segal 4).

In his view, human thought evolves through various stages, starting with mythological ideas and gradually progressing to scientific ideas. Not all scholars-not even all 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars have agreed with this view. Max Müller defines myth as:

Myth is a disease of language. Myths arose due to the lack of abstract nouns and neuter gender in ancient languages: anthropomorphic figures of speech, necessary in such languages, were eventually taken literally, leading to the idea that natural phenomena were conscious beings, gods. (qtd. in Segal 20)

Max Muller found the lack of abstract nouns and neuter gender in ancient language of myth where natural phenomena were conscious beings.

According to Frazer, man begins with an unfounded belief in impersonal magical laws. When he realizes that his applications of these laws don't work, he gives up his belief in natural law, in favor of belief in personal gods controlling nature-thus giving rise to religious myths. Meanwhile man continues practicing formerly magical rituals through force of habit, reinterpreting them as reenactments of mythical events. He contends, "Man realizes that nature does follow natural laws, but now he discovers their true nature through science. Here, again, science makes myth obsolete: man progresses from magic through religion to science" (711). Frazer argues that the death-rebirth myth is present in almost all cultural mythologies, and is acted out in terms of growing seasons and vegetation. The myth is symbolized by the death (i.e. final harvest) and rebirth (i.e. spring) of the god of vegetation. Robert Segal in his book *Jung on Mythology* writes:

With the same death-rebirth myth that Frazer sees as being representative of the growing seasons and agriculture as a point of comparison, a Jungian analysis envisions the death-rebirth archetype as

a symbolic expression of a process taking place not in the world but in the mind. That process is the return of the ego to the unconscious -a kind of temporary death of the ego -and its re-emergence, or rebirth, from the unconscious. (4)

For Frye, the death-rebirth myth that Frazer sees manifest in agriculture and the harvest is not ritualistic since it is involuntary and therefore must be done. Robert Segal in his book *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* asserts that, “by pitting mythical thought against modern scientific thought, such theories implied that modern man must abandon myth” (3). Many 20<sup>th</sup> century theories of myth rejected the 19<sup>th</sup> - century theories’ opposition of myth and science. Segal writes, “Twentieth-century theories have tended to see myth as almost anything but an outdated counterpart to science. Consequently, moderns are not obliged to abandon myth for science” (3). Swiss psychologist Carl Jung asserted that, “myth are the culturally elaborated representations of the contents of the deepest recess of the human psyche: the world of the archetypes” (qtd. in Walker 4). Jung’s work theorizes about myths and archetypes in relation to the unconscious, an inaccessible part of the mind.

Joseph Campbell in his book *The Power of Myth* expressed that, “there were two different orders of mythology: myths that are metaphorical of spiritual potentiality in the human being, and myths that have to do so with specific societies” (22). Campbell in his book *Occidental Mythology* points out four special functions of myth as:

The first function of mythology is that of eliciting and supporting a sense of awe before the mystery of being. The second function is to render a cosmology, an image of the universe that will support and be supported by this sense of awe. A third function is to support the

current social order, to integrate the individual organically with his group. The fourth function is to initiate the individual into the order of realities of his own psyche, guiding him towards his own spiritual enrichment and realization. (519-21)

The function of myth is to support the sense of fear about mystery of beings, to render of an image of the whole universe that will support this sense of awe and to maintain social order; and to guide the individual towards his own spiritual enrichment and realization.

Levi-Strauss claims that, “myth is language”. He clarifies, “myth is language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at ‘taking off’ from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling” (210). He asserts that myth cannot not be translated except at the cost of serious distortions. Further he writes:

The mythical value of the myth is preserved even through the worst translation. Whatever our ignorance of the language and culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader anywhere in the world. Its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax but in the story which it tells. (210)

According to him the originally of the myth is not based in its translation but in the story which it tells. He summarizes his argument to this point: the meaning of myth does not reside in the isolated elements which enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way those elements are combined. This leads him to assert that, “myth is made up of ‘constituent units’ which presuppose the constituent units present in language when analyzed on other levels -namely, phonemes, morphemes, and sememes- but they, nevertheless, differ from the latter in the same way as the latter differ among themselves; they belong to a higher and more complex order” (210-11).

The systematic comparison of myths from different culture is comparative mythology. It seeks to discover underlying themes that are common to the myths of multiple cultures. In some cases, comparative mythologists use the similarities between different mythologies to argue that those mythologies have a common source. This common source may be a common source of inspiration (e.g. a certain natural phenomenon that inspired similar myths in different cultures) or a common “protomythology” that diverged into the various mythologies we see today. Bruce Lincoln writes:

More precisely, mythic discourse deals in master categories that have multiple referents; levels of the cosmos, terrestrial geographies, plant and animal species, logical categories and the like. Their plots serve to organize the relations among these categories and to justify a hierarchy among them, establishing the rightness (or at least the necessity) of a world in which heaven is above earth, the lion the king of beasts the cooked more pleasing than the raw. (242)

Nineteenth century interpretations of myth were often highly comparative, seeking a common origin for all myths.

In modern society, myth is often regarded as historical or obsolete. Many scholars in the field of cultural studies are now beginning to research the idea that myth has worked itself into modern discourses. Modern formats of communication allow for wide spread communication across the globe, thus enabling mythological discourse and exchange among greater audiences than ever before. Various elements of myth can now be found in television, cinema and video games. Irving Singer writes:

Although myth was traditionally transmitted through the oral tradition on a small scale, the technology of the film industry has enabled film makers to transmit myth to large audiences via film dissemination. (5)

“In the psychology of Carl Jung, myths are the expression of a culture or society’s goals, fears, ambitions and dreams” (qtd. in Indika 93). Film is ultimately an expression of the society in which it was created, and reflects the norms and ideal of the time and location in which it is created. In this sense, film is simply the evolution of myth. The technological aspect of film changes the way the myth is distributed but the core idea of the myth is the same.

The basis of modern storytelling in both cinema and television lies deeply rooted in the mythological tradition. Many contemporary and technologically advanced movies often rely on ancient myths to construct narratives. Mikel J. Koven writes:

The Disney Corporation is notorious among cultural study scholars for ‘reinventing’ traditional childhood myths. While many films are not as obvious as Disney Fairy tales in respect to the employment of myth, the plots of many films are largely based on the rough structure of the myths. (185)

Mythological archetypes such as the cautionary tale regarding the abuse of technology, battles between gods and creation stories are often the subject of major film productions. These films are often created under the guise of cyberpunk, action movies, fantasy dramas and apocalyptic tales.

John Corner asserts that, “although the range of narratives, as well as the medium in which it is being told is constantly increasing, it is clear that myth continues to be a pervasive and essential component of the collective imagination”

(50). Recent films such as “Clash of the Titans”, “Immortals” or “Thor” continue the trend of mining traditional mythology in order to directly create a plot for modern consumption. Although these are generally considered inaccurate to the original mythologies on which they are based. Lopamundra Matira writes:

It can be argued that as film itself has become a way of transmitting myths, these films are no more inaccurate than the variants told by story tellers of the oral tradition. In fact, it is argued that these new contributions to traditional myths add value and meaning to the stories for new generations. (56-57)

With the invention of modern myth such as urban legends, the mythological tradition will carry on to the increasing variety of mediums available to the consumer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. The crucial idea is that myth is not simply a collection of stories permanently fixed to a particular time and place in history, but an ongoing social practice within every society.

### **Hindu Myths**

Mythology is a part of every religion. Mythology is concretized philosophy. Mythology is the science which investigates myths or fables or legends founded on remote events, especially those made in the early period of peoples’ existence. Mythology inspires the readers through precepts and laudable examples and goads them to attain perfection or the highest ideal. The abstract teachings and high subtle ideas are made highly interesting and impressive to the masses through the garb of stories, parables, legends, allegories and narratives. The sublime and abstract philosophical ideas and ideals of Hinduism are taken straight to the heart of the masses through impressive stories. All religions have their own mythology.



Mythology is slightly mixed up with a little history. It is difficult to make a fine distinction between history and mythology.

Hindu mythology is a large body of traditional narratives related to Hinduism as contained in Sanskrit literature (such as the Sanskrit epics), ancient Tamil literature, the Purans and other religious regional literature of South Asia. As such, it is a subset of Indian and Nepali culture. The roots of mythology that evolved from classical Hinduism come from the times of the Vedic civilization, from the ancient Vedic religion. The four Vedas, notably hymns of the *Rigveda*, contain allusions to many themes. The characters, philosophy and stories that make up ancient Vedic myths are indelibly linked with Hindu beliefs. The Vedas are four in number, namely *Rigveda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda*, and *Atharva Veda*. Some of these texts mention mythological concepts and machines very much similar to modern day scientific theories and machines.

In the period of classical Sanskrit, much material is preserved in the Sanskrit epics. The voluminous epics also provide a wide range of information about ancient Hindu society, philosophy, culture, religion and ways of life. The two great Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* tell the story of two specific incarnation of Vishnu (Ram and Krishna). The epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* serve as both religious scriptures and rich source of philosophy and morality. The most famous chapter in the *Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad Gita* in which, Lord Krishna explains the concepts of duty and righteousness to the hero Arjuna before the battle of Kurukshetra. The epics are set in different Yuga or periods of time. These are Satya, Treta, Dvapara and Kali Yuga. The *Ramayana* describes the life and times of Lord Rama (in the Treta Yuga) and the *Mahabharata* describes the life and times of Pandavas (in the Dvapara Yuga).

The avatara concept belongs to the Puranic times, well after the two great epics. The Puranas deal with stories that are old and do not appear in the epics. They contain legends and stories about the origins of the world, and the lives and adventures of a wide variety of gods, goddesses, heroes, heroines, and mythological creatures. They contain traditions related to ancient kings, seers, incarnations of God and legends about holy places and rivers. The *Bhagavata Purana* is probably the most popular of the Purans. It chronicles the legends of the Lord Vishnu and his incarnations on the earth. According to the Hindu *Vishnu Puran* Lord Vishnu himself descended into the womb of Devaki and was born as her son Vasudeva (i.e. Krishna):

Devaki bore in her womb the lotus-eyed deity before the birth of Krishna, no one could bear to gaze upon Devaki, from the light that invested her, and those who contemplated her radiance felt their minds disturbed. (qtd. in Dutt 293-94)

This is because of the divine power of the deity that produced the magical light and disturbed the mind of the people nearby.

In the Purans, Brahma the creator was joined in a divine triad with Lord Vishnu and Shiva, who were the preserver and destroyer, respectively. When Vishnu thought about creation, Brahma was created from a lotus that came from his navel. Then Brahma created all living beings in the earth. The end of Kali Yuga is marked by confusion of classes, the overthrow of the established standards, the cessation of all religious rites, and the rule of cruel and alien kings. Soon after this the world is destroyed by flood and fire. The story of a great flood is mentioned in ancient Hindu texts, particularly the *Satapatha Brahmins*. It is compared to the accounts of the deluge found in several religions and cultures. Sunil Sehgal writes, “Manu was informed of the impending flood and was protected by the Matsya Avatar of Lord

Vishnu, who had manifested himself in this form to rid the world of morally depraved human beings and protect the pious, as also all animals and plants” (401). Klaus K. Klostermaier clarifies that, “after the flood, the Lord inspires the *Manusmriti* largely based upon the *Vedas*, which details the moral code of conduct, of living and the division of society according to the caste system” (97).

Hindu mythology (in *Shiva Purana*) defines fourteen worlds- seven higher worlds (heavens) and seven lower ones (underworlds). The higher worlds are the seven vyahrtis, viz., bhu, bhuvas, svar, mahas, janas, tapas, and satya; and the lower ones are atala, vitala, sutala, rasaatala, talatala, mahatala, paatala. All the worlds except the earth are used as temporary places of stay as follows: upon one’s death on earth, the god of death (Yama Dharma Raajaa) tallies the person’s good/bad deeds while on earth and decides if the soul goes to a heaven and/or a hell, for how long, and in what capacity. Some versions of the mythology state that good and bad deeds neutralize each other and the soul therefore is born in either a heaven or a hell, but not both, whereas according to another school of thought, the good and bad deeds don’t cancel out each other. In either case, the soul acquires a body as appropriate to the worlds it enters. At the end of the soul’s time in those worlds, it returns to the earth. It is considered that only after a human life, can the soul reach supreme salvation.

There are great truths behind the ancient mythology of Hinduism. We can not ignore a thing simply because it has a garb of mythology. We can grasp the subtle philosophical truths through myths. Mythology explains and illustrates philosophy by means of legendary lives of great men or of supernatural beings. The lives of Sri Ram, Sri Krishna, Bhishma, Nala, Harischandra, Lakshmana, Bharat, Hanuman, Yudhisthira, Arjun, Sita, Savitri, Damayanti, Radha, etc., are sources of great spiritual inspiration of moulding our life, conduct and character. Thus mythology has its own

benefits and advantages. It stamps on the minds the subtle and abstract teachings of the *Vedas* through instructive stories and illuminating discourses and paves the way for men to lead a divine life and attain perfection, freedom and immortality.

## Chapter 2

### Mythological Criticism of Levi-Strauss

Levi-Strauss's myth theory is set forth in *Structural Anthropology* (1958). He begins by pointing out that the field of anthropology has turned away from the study of primitive religion, started by men like Tylor, Frazer, and Durkheim, all celebrated anthropologists who were psychologically oriented, thereby creating a vacuum subsequently filled by all kinds of amateurs. He believes that mythology has been one of the sub-field of religious anthropology to suffer the most. He says that, "myths are widely interpreted in conflicting ways: as collective dreams, as the outcome of a kind of esthetic play, or as the basis of ritual. Mythological figures are considered as personified abstractions, divinized heroes, or fallen gods" (207). According to him myths can be defined as the basis of religion, culture and ritual where the main characters can be divinized heroes or fallen gods. Furthermore he writes, "Whatever the hypothesis, the choice amounts to reducing mythology either to idle play to a crude kind of philosophic speculation" (207). Supporting his view, Bascom writes that, "as sacred stories, myths are often endorsed by rulers and priests and closely linked to religion or spirituality" (9). Another myth critic O'Flaherty writes, "I think it can be well argued as a matter of principle that, just as 'biography is about chaps,' so mythology is about gods" (78).

Levi-Strauss wants to move beyond a false choice between platitude and sophism. Some claim, he points out:

Human societies merely express, through their mythology,  
fundamental feelings common to the whole of mankind, such as love,  
hate or revenge or that they try to provide some kind of explanations

for phenomena which they cannot otherwise understand astronomical, meteorological, and the like. (207)

But, Levi-Strauss wonders, why would they strain for these rather than simpler empirical and devious explanations. Similarly, those of a psychoanalytic bent have shifted the problems away from the natural or cosmological toward the sociological and psychological fields arguing that, “if a given mythology confers prominence on a certain figure, let us say an evil grandmothers, it will be claimed that in such a society grandmothers are actually evil and that mythology reflects the social structure and the social relations; but should the actual data be conflicting, it would be as readily claimed that the purpose of mythology is to provide an outlet for repressed feelings” (208). In his view, whatever the situation, a clever dialectic will always find a way to pretend that a meaning has been found. Similarly, Campbell in his book *Occidental Mythology* writes, “A third function of mythology is to support the current social order, to integrate the individual organically with his group” (520).

Levi-Strauss sees a basic paradox in the study of myth. On one hand, mythical stories are fantastic and unpredictable: the content of myth seems completely arbitrary. On the other hand, the myths of different cultures are surprisingly similar:

On the one hand it would seem that in the course of a myth anything is likely to happen. There is no logic, no continuity. Any characteristic can be attributed to any subject; every conceivable relation can be found. With myth, everything becomes possible. But on the other hand, this apparent arbitrariness is belied by the astounding similarity between myths collected in widely different regions. (208)

He argues that, “therefore the problem: If the content of a myth is contingent, how are we going to explain the fact that myths throughout the world are so similar? It is

precisely this awareness of a basic antinomy pertaining to the nature of myth that may lead us towards its solution” (208). Levi-Strauss proposed that universal laws must govern mythical thought and resolve this seeming paradox, producing similar myths in different cultures. Each myth may seem unique, but he proposed it is just one particular instance of a universal law of human thought. Comparative mythologists use the similarities between different mythologies to argue that those mythologies have a common source. Littleton writes that, “this common source may be a common source of inspiration or a common ‘protomythology’ that diverged into the various mythologies we see today” (32).

In studying myth, Levi-Strauss tries to reduce apparently arbitrary data to some kind of order, and to attain a level at which a kind of necessity becomes apparent, underlying the illusions of liberty. Levi-Strauss sees a similarity between this contradiction and a problem which brought considerable worry to the first philosophers concerned with linguistic problems, a hurdle which linguistics had to overcome before it could begin to evolve as a science:

Ancient philosophers reasoned about language the way we do about mythology. On the one hand, they did notice that in a given language certain sequences of sounds were associated with definite meanings, and they earnestly aimed at discovering a reason for the linkage between those sounds and that meaning. Their attempt, however, was thwarted from the very beginning by the fact that the same sounds were equally present in other languages although the meaning they conveyed was entirely different. (208)

Levi-Strauss reasons that many contemporary interpreters of myth labor under similar misapprehensions. Jung’s notion that the archetype possesses a certain affinity with a

meaning is comparable to the long supported error that a sound may possess a certain affinity with a meaning. Levi-Strauss is of the view that, “everybody will agree that the Saussurean principle of the arbitrary character of linguistic signs was a prerequisite for the accession of linguistics to the scientific level” (209).

However, Levi-Strauss contends that, “myth cannot simply be treated as language for myth is language: to be known, myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech. But, to preserve its specificity we must be able to show that it is both the same thing as language, and also something different from it” (209). He expresses that this is because language itself can be analyzed into things which are at the same time similar and yet different: hence, Saussure’s distinction between *langue* and *parole*, one being the structural side of language, the other the statistical aspect of it, *langue* belonging to reversible time, *parole* being non-reversible. Later, Levi-Strauss equates reversible and non-reversible, synchronic and diachronic. He took many of his ideas from Structural linguistics as well as from Emile Durkheim and particularly Marcel Mauss. Saussure argued that, “linguists needed to move beyond the recording of *parole* and come to an understanding of *langue*, the underlying structural patterns of a language” (120).

Levi-Strauss contends that myth uses a third referent which combines the properties of the first two events. He contends that, “on the one hand, a myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place a long time ago. But what gives the myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless; it explains the present and the past as well as the future” (209). Levi-Strauss contrasts myth with an event like the French Revolution which, for the historian, is a sequence of past happenings, a non-reversible series of events the remote consequences of which may still be felt at present while for the politician, it is both a sequence belonging to the



past and timeless pattern which can be detected in the contemporary French social structure and which provides a clue for its interpretation, a lead from which to infer future developments. Supporting the view of Levi-Strauss, Pettazzoni asserts that, “a myth is usually regarded as a true account of the remote past” (102). He defines that, “many societies have two categories of traditional narrative, ‘true stories’ or myths, and ‘false stories’ or fables” (101).

Levi-Strauss furthermore interprets myth as:

It is that double structure, altogether historical and ahistorical, which explains how myth while pertaining to the realm of parole and calling for an explanation as such, as well as to that of langue in which it is expressed, can also be an absolute entity on a third level which, though it remains linguistic by nature, is nevertheless distinct from the other two. (210)

He finds the combination of langue and parole in the expression of myth and it remains linguistic by nature, is nevertheless distinct from the other two. It is that double structure, altogether historical and ahistorical explains the myth. Levi-Strauss stresses the originality of myth in relation to other linguistic phenomena. Unlike poetry which cannot be translated except at the cost of serious distortions. He writes that, “the mythical value of the myth is preserved even through the worst translation. Whatever our ignorance of the language and culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader anywhere in the world” (210). He clarifies that the substance of the myth does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the story which it tells. He identifies myth as a type of speech through which a language can be discovered. Saussure sees in the structure of language a series of oppositions or opposites.

Levi-Strauss summarizes his argument to this point that, “the meaning of myth does not reside in the isolated elements which enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way those elements are combined” (210). According to him, “myth is made up of constituent units which presuppose the constituent units present in language when analyzed on other levels—namely phonemes, morphemes, and sememes” (210-11). He calls these higher units which differentiate myth from other forms of speech its gross constituent units or mythemes. Levi-Strauss then reveals his technique which consists in analyzing each myth individually, breaking down its story into the shortest possible sentences, and writing each sentence on an index card bearing a number corresponding to the unfolding of the story. He says that, “each such card will thus show that a certain function is, at a given time, linked to a given subject that is each gross constituent unit will consist of a relation” (211).

However, this definition remains unsatisfactory because the linguistic units of a lower order are also made up of relations and we still find ourselves in the realm of a non-reversible time, since the numbers of the cards corresponds to the unfolding of the narrative while mythological time is both synchronic and diachronic. This leads Levi-Strauss to articulate a new hypothesis, which constitutes the very core of our argument. He stresses that, “the true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but bundles of such relations, and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning” (212). Opposing his view Marcel Hanefff forwards the view of Carl Jung and writes that, “this approach is a break from the ‘symbolists,’ such as Carl Jung, who dedicate themselves to find meaning solely within the constituents rather than their relations” (160). Furthermore Levi-Strauss writes:

Relations pertaining to the same bundle may appear diachronically at remote intervals, but when we have succeeded in grouping them together we have reorganized our myth according to a time referent of a new nature corresponding to the prerequisite of the initial hypothesis, namely a two-dimensional time referent which is simultaneously diachronic and synchronic, and which accordingly integrates the characteristics of language on the one hand, and those of parole on the other. (212)

Levi-Strauss recognizes the same bundle of myth according to a time referent of a new nature, namely a two-dimensional time referent which diachronic and synchronic that accordingly integrates the characteristics of langue on the one hand and those of parole on the other.

Levi-Strauss draws a comparison between myth, on the one hand, and a musical score, on the other:

Hence the hypothesis: what if patterns showing affinity, instead of being considered in succession, were to be treated as one complex pattern and read as a whole? By getting at what we call harmony, they would then see that an orchestra score, to be meaningful, must be read diachronically along one axis—that is, page after page, and from left to right— and synchronically along the other axis, all the notes written vertically making up one gross constituent unit. (212)

Later, Levi-Strauss contends that, “the synchronic-diachronic structure of the myth permits us to organize it into diachronic sequences which should be read synchronically” (229). This slated structure as he terms it, comes to the surface, so to speak, through the process of repetition. At this point, he offers a concrete example of

the method of Oedipus myth. Levi-Strauss has applied the diachronic and synchronic structure of language from structural linguistics of Saussure in order to study the complex pattern of each content to define the myth. He breaks each of the versions of a myth down into a series of sentences and relates them according to a function and a subject. Sentences with the same function are given the same number and bundled together. These are mythemes.

Grouping all the units of the myths in the four particular columns Levi-Strauss argues that we thus:

Find ourselves confronted with four vertical columns, each of which includes several relations belonging to the same bundle. Were we tell the myth, we would disregard the columns and read the rows from left to right and from top to bottom. But if we want to understand the myth, then we will have to disregard one half of the diachronic dimension (top to bottom) and read from left to right, column after column, each one being considered as a unit. (214)

Reading it in sequence from left to right, top to bottom, the myth is categorized sequentially and by similarities. Through analyzing the commonalities between the “mythemes” of the Oedipus story, understandings can be wrought from its categories. Thus, a structural approach towards myths is to address all of these constituents. Furthermore, a structural approach should account for all versions of a myth, as all versions are relevant to the function of the myth as a whole.

All the units grouped in a particular column exhibit one column feature: e.g. all the elements in the first column have something to do with blood relations which are overemphasized, that is, are more intimate than they should be, that is, their common feature is the overrating of blood relations. The second column expresses the

same thing, but inverted: understanding of blood relations. The third column refers to monsters being slain by men, and in the fourth, all the names have a common feature: all the hypothetical meanings refer to difficulties in walking straight and standing upright. Levi-Strauss then asks what is the relationship between the third and the fourth columns. In the third column, the dragon is a chthonian being which has to be killed in order that mankind be born from the Earth while the sphinx is a monster unwilling to permit men to live.

Hence, the common feature of the third column is denial of the autochthonous origin of man. This helps to explain the meaning of the fourth column: in mythology, he argues, “it is a universal characteristic of men born from the earth that at the moment they emerge from the depth they either can not walk or they walk clumsily” (215). Thus, the common feature of the fourth column is the persistence of the autochthonous origin of man. It follows he argues that, “column four is to column three as column one is to column two” (216). This leads Levi-Strauss to offer an interpretation of the Oedipus myth as:

The myth has to do with the inability, for a culture which holds the belief that mankind is autochthonous to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman. Although the problem obviously can not be solved, the Oedipus myth provides a kind of logical tool which relates the original problem-born from one or born from two? – To the derivative problem: born from different or born from same? (216)

Culture holds the belief that mankind is autochthonous but human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman. Levi-Strauss shows the contradiction

between these two theories and states the original problem in Oedipus myth that man-born from one or born from two? Further he clarifies that, “by a correlation of this type, the overrating of blood relations is to the understanding of blood relations as the attempt to escape autochthony is to the impossibility to succeed in it. Although experience contradicts theory, social life validates cosmology by its similarity of structure. Hence, cosmology is true” (216).

There is from this point of view, no true version of the myth. Rather, we define the myth as consisting of all its versions. He argues, “There is no single true version of which all the others are but copies or distortions” (218). Freud’s account is, for example, but one more version of the myth, concerned less with the problem of autochthony versus bisexual reproduction than that of understanding how one can be born from two: how is it that we do not have only one procreator, but a mother plus a father? Moreover, he argues, “if a myth is made up of all its variants, structural analysis should take all of them into account leading to a comparative analysis, the final outcome being the structural law of the myth” (217). To check this theory, Levi-Strauss devotes much of the rest of the essay to an exhaustive analysis of all the known versions of the Zuni origin and emergence myth.

But Levi-Strauss shows the confusion in using all available variants in myth. Further he writes:

On the other hand, it cannot be too strongly emphasized that all available variants should be taken into account. If Freudian comments on the Oedipus complex are a part of the Oedipus myth, then questions such as whether Cushing’s version of the Zuni origin myth should be retained or discarded become irrelevant. There is no single true version

of which all the others are but copies or distortions. Every version belongs to the myth. (218)

The reason for the discouraging results in works on general mythology can finally be understood. They stem from two causes. First, comparative mythologists have selected preferred versions instead of using them all. Second, we have seen that the structural analysis of one variant of one myth belonging to one tribe already requires two dimensions. When we use several variants of the same myth for the same tribe or village, the frame of reference becomes three dimensional, and as soon as we try to enlarge the comparison, the number of dimensions required increases until it appears quite impossible to handle them intuitively.

Further he explains that the confusions and platitudes which are the outcome of the comparative mythology can be explained by the fact that multi-dimensional frames of reference are often ignored or are naively replaced by two or three-dimensional ones. Indeed, progress in comparative mythology depends largely on the cooperation of the mathematicians who would undertake to express in symbols multi-dimensional relations which cannot be handled otherwise. In all cases, it was found that the theory was sound; light was thrown, not only on North American mythology, but also on a previously unnoticed kind of logical operation, or one knows so far only in a wholly different context.

Reading a simplified chart of the Zuni emergence myth Levi-Strauss finds out that the life-death mediation is the problem in Zuni and Pueblo life:

As the chart indicates, the problem is the discovery of life-death mediation. For the Pueblo, this is especially difficult; they understand the origin of human life in terms of the model of plant life. They share that belief with the ancient Greeks, and it is not without reason that we

chose the Oedipus myth as our first example. But the American and Indian case, the highest form of plant life is to be found in agriculture which is periodical, in nature, that is, which consists in an alteration between life and death. (220-21)

Further he interprets that there are three different ways of handling the problem. In the Cushing version, the difficulty revolves around an opposition between activities yielding an immediate result and activities yielding a delayed result-death has to become integrated so that agriculture can exist. Parsons' version shifts from hunting to agriculture, while Stevenson's version operates the other way around. It can be shown that all the differences between these versions can be rigorously correlated with these basic structures.

According to Levi-Strauss, "mythical thought always progress from the awareness of oppositions towards their resolution" (224). In other words, myths consist of elements that oppose or contradict each other and other elements that "mediate", or resolve, those oppositions. According to Levi-Strauss:

The trickster of American mythology has remained so far a problematic figure. Why is it that throughout North America his role is assigned practically everywhere to either coyote or raven? If we keep in mind that mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution, the reason for these choices becomes clearer. (224)

Levi-Strauss thinks the Trickster of many Native American mythologies acts as a "mediator". Levi-Strauss's argument hinges on two facts about the Native American trickster: the trickster has a contradictory and unpredictable personality; the trickster is almost always a raven or a coyote. He adds, "We need only assume that two



opposite terms with no intermediary always tend to be replaced by two equivalent terms which admit of a third one as a mediator; then one of the polar terms and the mediator become replaced by a new triad, and so on” (224).

Levi-Strauss argues that the raven and coyote “mediate” the opposition between life and death. The relationship between agriculture and hunting is analogous to the opposition between life and death: agriculture is solely concerned with producing life (at least up until harvest time); hunting is concerned with producing death. Furthermore, the relationship between herbivorous and beasts of prey are analogous to the relationship between agriculture and hunting: like agriculture, herbivorous are concerned with plants; like hunting, beasts of prey are concerned with catching meat. Levi-Strauss points out that the raven and coyote eat carrion and are therefore halfway between herbivorous and beasts of prey: like beasts of prey, they eat meat; like herbivorous, they don’t catch their food. Thus he presents a mediating structure of the following type:

Life

Agriculture

Herbivores

Raven, Coyote

Beasts of prey

Hunting

Death

Levi-Strauss argues about the mediating structure as:

Carrion- eating animals are like beasts of prey, but they are also like food-plant producers. Or to put it otherwise, Pueblo style (for Pueblo agriculture is more meaningful than hunting): ravens are to garden as

beasts of prey are to herbivorous animals may be called first to act as mediators on the assumption that they are like collectors and gatherers (plant-food eaters), while they can be used as animal food through they are not themselves hunters. (224-25)

He further clarifies, “Thus we may have mediators of the first order, of the second order, and so on, where each term generates the next by a double process of opposition and correlation (225).

By uniting herbivore traits with traits of beasts of prey, the raven and coyote somewhat reconcile herbivorous and beasts of prey: in other words, they mediate the opposition between herbivorous and beasts of prey. As we have seen, this opposition ultimately is analogous to the opposition between life and death. Criticizing the theory on the origin of the tricker Stanley Diamond notes that, “while the secular civilized often consider the concepts of life and death to be polar primitive cultures often see them as aspects of a single condition, the condition of existence” (308).

Therefore, the raven and coyote ultimately mediate the opposition between life and death. Thus, Levi-Strauss believes, explains why the coyote and raven have a contradictory personality when they appear as the mythical tricker:

The tricker is a mediator. Since his mediating function occupies a position halfway between two polar terms; he must retain something of that duality-namely an ambiguous and equivocal character. (226)

Because the raven and coyote reconcile profoundly opposed concepts (i.e. life and death), their own mythical personalities must reflect this duality or contradiction: in other words, they must have a contradictory, “tricky” personality. This theory about the structure of myth helps support Levi-Strauss’s more basic theory about human thought. According to this more basic theory, universal laws govern all areas of

human thought. Diamond remarks that, “the tricker names ‘raven’ and ‘coyote’ which Levi-Strauss explains can be arrived at with greater economy on the basis of, let us say, the cleverness of the animals involved, their ubiquity, elusiveness, capacity to make mischief, their undomesticated reflection of certain human traits” (311).

Levi-Strauss ends by offering some final thoughts on the method which he proposes for the explanation of myth. The method which he proposes has the advantage of bringing some order to what was previously chaos and to perceive some basic logical processes which are at the root of mythical thought. According to him, “the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction. Any myth is an intermediary entity between a statistical aggregate and the structure itself which informs particular mythical paroles” (229). This leads Levi-Strauss to conclude that there is little difference between the mind of so-called primitive man and his allegedly more sophisticated modern counterparts: the kind of logic in mythical thought is as rigorous as that of modern science, the difference lying not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of the things to which it is applied. He concludes that, “the same logical processes operate in myth as in science, and that man has always been thinking equally well; the improvement lies, not in an alleged progress of man’s mind, but in the discovery of new areas to which it may apply its unchanged and unchanging powers” (231).

### Chapter 3

#### Myth in Laxmi Prasad Devkota's *Shakuntala*

Laxmi Prasad Devkota's *Shakuntala* is a Hindu mythological text, presents the myth of king Dushyanta, Shakuntala and their son Bharat after whom India gets her name (Bharat). The myth of Shakuntala begins from the penance of Sage Vishwamitra and ends in happy reunion of Shakuntala and king Dushyanta. The main mythological character Shakuntala is the daughter of sage Vishwamitra and nymph Menuka who is left alone in the forest by her parents after her birth. Later, she is brought up by the couple of sage Kanva in the hermitage as their daughter. After gandharba marriage with king Dushyanta in the forest, she is separated from her husband for a long time due to the curse of sage Durbasha and gives birth to a male child named Bharat who rules for several years in India after King Dushyanta.

Devkota pulls the attraction of the readers in the beginning by memorizing the tale of "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" from *Arabian Nights* of medieval Arabic literature in order to show the magical rituals in myths. Ali Baba, the mythological character is a son of a merchant who marries a poor woman and settles into the trade of a woodcutter. While collecting and cutting firewood in the forest, he happens to overhear a group of forty thieves visiting their treasure store. The treasure is in a cave, the mouth of which is sealed by magic. It opens on the words "Iftah ya simsim" (commonly written as "Open Sesame" in English), and seals itself on the words "Ikfil ya simsim" ("Close Sesame"). When the thieves are gone, Ali Baba enters the cave himself, and takes some of the treasure home. After that, Ali Baba becomes rich and prosperous but his brother Cassim is killed by the thieves due to the misspelling of the magic word to get back out again from the cave.

Devkota begins the myth of Shakuntala with an invocation to the goddess Saraswati, the goddess of sacred books and lyre in Hindu mythology like to Muse in Greek mythology. He makes the prayer to goddess Saraswati thus:

Sing, goddess of the sacred book and lyre,  
Saraswati upon thy snow-white swan  
In robes of lily decked, a virgin pure,  
Divinely featured, calm like prayer thou,  
The beads of crystal coil around thine arm. (1)

Devkota explains the form of Saraswati, the prime source of knowledge and wisdom. The invocation is followed by the short introduction of the subject matter that the poet is going to deal in the epic. The poet mentions that the epic is about Bharat, his father Dushyanta, his mother Shakuntala, and the hardships they undergo:

Then sing, O Indian goddess wise,  
Of him who gave our fatherland its name,  
The name to honour with the life we love  
Bharat our dearest country and our home,  
Bharat his name- the great Dushyanta's cub. (2)

Bharat, the son of King Dushyanta and Shakuntala who gives the name of the country, is popular even still in Bharat. People in India honor him and love him due to his great contribution for the country, their fatherland. Bharat is a great historical king after king Dushyanta.

Devkota summarizes the story of Shakuntala's birth in these lines thus:

God-sent, a little fairy in the woods,  
When penance, hard on its unshaken seat,  
In its excess menaced the rule of heaven.

Say how, of winged minstrels nurtured, she

Was taken into Kanva's hermitage. (2)

Shakuntala is the daughter of sage Vishwamitra and nymph Menuka who is brought up in sage Kanva's hermitage. King Vishwamitra is frustrated with the hollow and empty life of this world and wants to leave his palace for eternal peace and happiness. Vishwamitra says that, "this palace is a toy/ A sport for every breeze that sways the branch/ It is a dream in marble, doomed to death" (5). He sees the palace as a toy and life as a dream. He is worried of the death and the life after death. Further he expresses, "These maids are puppets on those airy towers/ Destined to fall" (5). In his view, all things in the world are only for a moment.

The minister tries to stop the King telling him that the King has no right to flee because the pilot can not leave the helm when storms are brewing. But the determined King Vishwamitra decides to leave the palace. He sees the eternal happiness and long lasting existence in the supreme power of God. According to him:

This world is ruled by God's own will.

We are no rulers, tiny is our power.

We sway the world with rods of doom and fear,

And yet man's soul, untamed, its ill still works. (7)

In his view, we are not the rulers but we are ruled by God. Man's soul is untamed and ill due to the ignorance and lack of knowledge to know the way of purifying it.

Further he says, "We are the subjects and slaves of God" (7). This is because the whole world is ruled by the supreme power of God. Similarly a person who has not ruled himself cannot rule others. It is only truth that rules the world. So, he has to go to find that truth which he can not find in these idle haunts.

In this way, King Dushyanta leaves the palace and passes through deserts parched and scorched. Finally he reaches Godavari's bank and finds this place more sacred spot on earth for penance. He is spellbound by the scenery there. He sees new life, new birth, fresh hopes and paradise in the beauty of the spot. Devkota compares the beautiful scene of Godavari with Lord Krishna's place Brindaban thus:

While ripples dimple fair Godavari,  
And pollens shower on the Radhika  
The Lord's own love, the beauty she presides  
This world of play, May-Queen to Brindaban.  
The leaves begin to dance. In rhythmic waves  
The sea-breeze sways the branches bursting full. (8)

Godavari is full of natural beauty like Lord Krishna's Brindaban where Krishna used to play the flute with his beloved Radhika. The story of Lord Krishna in Brindaban memorizes the beauty of Godavari where sage Vishwamitra sees comfortable and peaceful place for penance.

Having the hope of eternal happiness and truth in mind Sage Vishwamitra sits for the great penance remembering the Lord Krishna in this way:

There squatting in the proper pose he sat,  
His body motionless, breatheless in prayer,  
His naked body open to the winds,  
His eyes in-turning lifted to the light.  
Three wrinkles creased his fair majestic brows. (10)

Sage Vishwamitra finds a stony seat with soft green moss and begins to meditate motionlessly in his naked body. He spends centuries in penance but he is still blooming. His penance shakes the throne of Lord Indra in the heaven. Indra, the King

of heaven, feels his brow twitch. His bolt shakes in his might hand; his lofty throne feels insecure. It is unacceptable for him that a mortal earthly human being is mounting up to his own lofty height.

So, ministers of heaven gather to discuss about the situation. They plan to send the fairest nymph to disturb the penance of sage Vishwamitra. All gods of heaven reach in this conclusion:

Still there is time: Sage Vishwamitra yet  
 Still lives on earth. We shall our fairest nymph  
 Choose from the galaxy of loveliest stars  
 And send her down to win his mighty soul. (13)

They decide to send fairy Menaka who has the gift of talents to lull and entice the mortals. Through her beautiful body, she can titillate any beings. So in order to make Vishwamitra end his penance, they decide to send her to the earth. Besides, nymph Menaka feels fear and insecure on the earth. She expresses her feelings and says, “My fairy friends! I feel an earthly fear/ To drop so low to earth where cares abound” (15). Further she says, “Great is the king and greater yet the sage/ In him grim-willed. I fear his soul, his might” (16).

Menaka’s friends encourage her saying that she is the born sorceress of beauty. Further they console her thus:

Born sorceress of beauty, fear not, go!  
 The wrath of sage shall be cool as sand  
 When o’er the desert hot the lunar witch  
 Sheds brilliance, enchanting all the earth. (16-17)

They say that wrath of sage shall be cool as sand when her enchanting figure he beholds. This gives a faint courage to her and she decides to drop to the earth despite



being unwilling to do so. On the other hand, Vishwamitra is so much deep in his penance that he is completely unaware of earthly phenomena. Sitting under the spreading bow, he neither feels the summer heat nor winter hoar. The nymph Menaka floats for a space. Descending nearer to the earth she sees Godavari. She touches the earth and feels fears of the grim-willed king austere. His locks are brown like that of Lord Shiva in his mountain solitude. His broad brows of majesty in lucid pride wrinkles in triple line and his eyes are closed. He scarcely breathes and his palms are captured. He looks like a giant with a hero's make.

According to the myth theory as a tool we can define myth as a traditional story closely linked to religion and spirituality where the main characters are gods supernatural heroes and humans who are concerned with divine power. Here Menaka prays Lord Vishnu for divine power to distract the sage from penance. Then she begins to sing and dance to lure the sage towards her. Menaka shows her acts in this way:

Menaka sang of love: the love that rules  
The stars, the flowers and the universe;  
How all the world began in love to end  
In all-consuming love. "In every grain,"  
She sang, "there is a throbbing heart of love." (21)

So, Menaka begins to sing a song of love that rules the stars, the flowers and the universe. After various attempts made by her, the sage finally wakes up. Bewildered, the sage sits like one who from a dream just hears a call. Menaka continues her dance, song and she exposes her naked body that distracts the sage completely.

Finally, Vishwamitra asks Menaka thus:

Who mayst thou be fair dancer of the woods?

Thou singest sweet: art naiad, dryad, fay,  
 Or Apsara or devee, ocean nymph  
 Or lunar goddess, earth's fair daughter-which?  
 Art paragon of Indra's paradise  
 Or some Caucasian fairy? Tell me, maid! (29)

Vishwamitra asks Menaka who she is? Apsara or devee? Lunar goddess? Or some Caucasian fairy? As he cannot control passion that is arising within him by Menaka, he moves to touch the lady. She, however, reminds him that it is unacceptable for the people like him to forget his duty. She tells him that great souls are distant things to beauty's touch, and that women pull the soul of men a down. At the same time, she fears that she will be condemned with eternal tears for distracting the person on penance.

But the sage has another stream of thought. All his previously dominant instinct has arisen. He has now become totally earthly one. Now for him woman is man's way to heaven. He says, a woman's beauty comes from God, and if it wins by grace a man's soul mortified it leads that soul to truth by beauty's path. He says that he is alive to beauty, and to love. So, he requests Menaka to accept him as a slave to her. Now, Menaka with eyes down-cast blushes, "I am a nymph, an apsara of Indra's paradise" (31). Further she gives her introduction thus:

My name is Menaka, thy humble slave.  
 Upon my soul a curse has been imposed  
 That for a minor fault of acting's art  
 On earth a full year's season must I live. (31)

She also tells him that she is accursed to spend a year in earth due to her minor fault in the art of acting. Eventually, Vishwamitra renounces his attempt to get the truth through penance. They both lay lose in witchery. They are in deep love.

Menaka becomes pregnant and after one year she gives birth to a baby girl.

She is described as a reward of God thus:

A single cherub, cherry blossom sweet,  
A rich reward. God sent to earth, nymph-born,  
A smiling which was this, whose bloom, compound  
Of heav'n and earth, the home of Nature graced. (34)

Shakuntala is a very beautiful and sweet smiling baby girl as the cherry blossom, a valuable reward that God sent to earth, grows in the natural beauty of the forest. As a year is spent, Menaka says to her husband that she has to depart. She says that this departure gives a grave pain for her but this is the rule of the earth to depart like thorns and leaves depart from the trees in winter. Vishwamitra entreats her not to leave him alone with that “little paradise” namely their daughter, Shakuntala. But Menaka, as instructed by Indra, leaves for heaven while Vishwamitra left alone with Shakuntala, is disillusioned. In fear, he feels shamed to be alive. Now he realizes that the gods have deceived him.

Then Vishwamitra decides to leave the child in jungle to be looked after by the birds and the animals and goes to north for penance. He says that little birds will mother the child, and the earth will nourish her. Now, the child is left alone in the forest. But because she is the child of a nymph, birds begin to look after her. The downy-breasted birds flutter their wings to her side; some dancing trail their coloured trails for show and sing songs. The swarm of bees come in humming, buzzing and drop the nectar on the baby's lips. The birds named Cookoor, Piwu, Kafal-kafal,

Kauwa, Raven that nestle in the woods dance or sing and shield to warm her with their downy wings from chilly movements of the woodland breeze. “A protegee of birds Shakuntala, lives smiling happily” (38).

One day, the aged Kanva Rishi with grey beard comes and he hears a piteous cry. He sees a human child with fear-filled eyes sleeping alone in the forest and expresses his thoughts thus:

“Oho, sweet child, what dost thou in this bower?  
Once blessed of thee what heartless parents left?  
An infant nymph art thou, a fairy child,  
Or rosy bastard to a shameless god?” (40)

Sage Kanva praises the beauty of the child and scolds the parents of the child telling them heartless and cruel. He blames the god that it is the shameless act of him leaving the child alone in the forest. Then, he picks her up and takes her to his home. His wife Gautami calls the child “a bastard child of love” and denies keeping her. But finally when Kanva Rishi persuades her, she realizes her mistake and takes the child as a gift from god. Slowly the child grows and reaches girlhood. She learns to play the harp of life in all its varied moods. She learns to dance with friends like faun and sings like bird in woods at liberty.

The King Dushyanta, on the other hand, orders his treasurer to collect five hundred coins of sterling gold for his departure to hunt. After few days, Dushyanta and his members in hunt come to the jungle where Kanva Rishi along with his daughter and wife are living. But now the couple of Kanva are in their pilgrimage to Somnath. There when he is about to hunt the fawn, two maids appear and speak:

“O mighty King, forbear; the barb replace.  
As breathless speeds the hermit’s holy beast,

A glossy innocence by Kanva fed  
 With loving hands within his sacred bower,  
 Him injure not, our little brother fawn!" (48)

Those two maids entreat him not to kill the fawn because Kanva has fed them with his own hands. They also request him to come to the hermit to stay. There he happens to see Shakuntala watering the plants and flowers. He introduces himself as a messenger of great Dushyanta. His heart is welled up with his love for her. So, he offers his ring to her with the label of King Dushyanta on it. Priyamvada introduces Shakuntala to him and says that she is sixteen years old. The king is totally spellbound by the serenity of the place and the beauty and grace of Shakuntala. So he sends his men back to the palace.

Shakuntala's friends find out that she is not like before. They feel that something is happening to her. So, they request her to share her problem with them. Then Shakuntala reveals her real problem that she is in love. She feels nervous to express the secret problem and she writes, "I pine for him, proud robber of my heart/ Who knoweth not the theft unwriting made" (71). She expresses her love writing on the lotus. Then all her friends become curious to know the person whom she loves. Further she writes the name 'Dushyanta' upon the lotus leaf. On the other hand, the King has observed all these activities secretly and seizes his golden opportunity. They both pass the delightful days in solitude. Their wedding rite is celebrated in woodland temple. They spend their married life with full joy but that is not to last long.

There comes from court the news of threatened peace and war tumultuous. Now it is the time of separation of the couple due to the war. The poet expresses the tragic situation of the couple thus:

By thoughts of parting both were sore dismayed;

And many a tear coursed down the lovers' cheeks.

How would she pass in sleepless solitude

Those lonely nights? In weeping to the stars?

At such a prospect sad Shakuntala

At heart a fluttering felt, while Dushyanta

Could only sigh in great despondency. (79)

By thought of parting they both are dismayed. How can Shakuntala live the life alone without Dushyanta? But the situation compels her to live alone. The King is a purchased slave, subject of all his subjects, yoked to rule. Because he has no option but to go on war, he tries to comfort her with the assurance that he will take her to his palace soon, and she will be declared the queen. He also says if he does not return from the war, she should not call him deceit. He also promises to send the news before the letter carved upon his signet ring out-numbered.

After parting from her husband Shakuntala spends her days in hope of his arrival. But there is no news from Dushyanata even after many days. She remains weeping and remembering her husband in gloomy mood. At that time, a sage who is angry by nature named Durbasha comes and enquires about the name of this place. Shakuntala, totally lost in reverie does not respond. After her dumbness even in his next enquiry, the sage gets angry and curses her thus:

No woman thou, but painted trollop-face.

Unfit for woman's office, motherhood;

For, quick as candle burns, the flame of love

Thou wastest, lost in evil passion's thoughts.

As thou forgett'st the duty ow'd to guests

So by thy lover thou forgotten be! (81)

Sage Durbasha in rage curses her that her love for her husband melts like the candle. As she forgets her duty towards her guest, her husband will also forget her. Totally lost in the memory of her husband, Shakuntala does not listen to that curse that Durbasha pronounced. But her friends happen to listen that curse. They beg the sage to soften the curse as once the curse is thrown, it cannot be undone. Now Durbasha lessens the scope of the curse saying that unless she shows her husband the token of love that he has given, he will not remember her.

Now the winter comes and Kanva Rishi returns from the pilgrimage (from Somnath's sacred shrine). He then listens carefully what Gautami and Shankuntala says. His wife tells the story of Dushyanta's love, the tender courtship, marriage and the present pregnant condition of the daughter. The sage is not angry at all and he enquires about any message sent by him. He is so happy thinking that his daughter is going to be a queen soon. He says, "She hath fulfilled/ My earnest hopes and aspirations ford/ Bright be her days and high her dignity" (86). Then the news of the king being victorious comes, but no news comes from him. Gautami sees the symptoms of Shakuntala's sad despondency. Kanva Rishi, on the other hand, decides to send her and says to his wife:

Our daughter is a debt that must be paid  
 To him who purchased all her loveliness.  
 She came to us a nestling and in warmth  
 We brought her up as parents loving-kind;  
 But wings have grown and off she needs must fly. (86)

Kanva Rishi says that their daughter is a debt that must be paid to the king. She has come to them as a bird and now she has got wings, she must fly.

According to Kanva Rishi, Shakuntala is a stranger, born for foreign home. She has come as a sojourner in their house. They have got a temporary opportunity of happiness. But she must leave them because Hindu holy scripture has prescribed the rule that a pregnant wife should go to her husband's house and bear her child there. Gautami also agrees with him and thus the day is fixed for sending Shakuntala home. They also agree that Gautami will go as a guardian. Shakuntala expresses her wish to take Priyamvada with her as a guardian. But the aged sage denies her request. Shakuntala remembers and loves her father's home. "Her heart-strings pulled and tears came uncontrolled" (87). Her friends come and comfort her grief. Priyamvada says, "Upon a golden throne thou shalt be queen" (87). Further she says, "Fair Seeta, ideal wife, thou shalt outshine" (88). Priyamvada wishes her glorious life as Seeta, an ideal wife of Shree Ram. Thus Shakuntala is encouraged to leave her father's home in order to go to Dushyanta's palace, her own real home.

Shakuntala shows great affection towards her parents and home and expresses her wish to stay there with her parents to serve them. She does not want to be exiled. Then the sage Kanva tells her:

In search of home 'tis woman's destiny  
 To roam the world, if need be, with her mate.  
 Her parent's home is but a maiden-inn  
 Where boys are lords, but girls mere sojourners. (90)

Kanva Rishi tells that it is the destiny of a woman to leave her parents for another home to roam the world if needed with her mate. Her parents' home is only a maiden-inn where boys are lords and girls are sojourners. The woman born must find her lord and the man to whom she married is her protector. That home is a kingdom of a woman; there she rules, and man is a slave there. The wife must fill her home with



plenitude of light and joy. To woman, mistress of the hearth and home, her lord is god. So Kanva Rishi teaches Shakuntala to be meek, humble and modest in her dignity; be poor before her husband and rich in sympathy. Kanva's moral teachings encourage Shakuntala to complete her duty properly.

Shakuntala hears those teachings obediently. Yet she can not stop the tear rolling out of her eyes nor can she leave the arm of her father. But her mother Gautami is already dressed, so she needs to leave. Priyamvada says, "When shall we see next, Shakuntala?" (92). They cry, and all in floods of tears dissolve. Shakuntala says, "My parents dear, when shall I see again?" (92). Ultimately she accepts her fate and says, "I go. Fulfill I must my destiny" (92). After she leaves, her friends return home all sighing, all distressed. They say, "Our Kunja's light is gone, Shakuntala!" (92). On their way to Dushyanta's palace, both mother and daughter, in each dawn, go to take their baths in gold reflecting waters. These baths provide great pleasure to Shakuntala that she plunges, and rubbes her limbs till Gautami reproves. But this sport is doomed to cost her. From her hand, Dushyanta's ring from circled finger slippes into the waves. She is unknown to it. A hungry fish gulps that ring. Thus, as Durbasha Rishi had cursed, the token of love that Dushyanta had given to her is lost.

Dushyanta, on the other hand, gets victory over the enemies and returns to capital. He is then lost in music and entertainment arranges to celebrate the victory. But the king is feeling pain in his heart but unknown the reason for it. He is ignorant of Durbasha's dreadful curse that makes him oblivious of his marriage, his love and his vow to return to Shakuntala. Then arrives Gautami, with her daughter Shakuntala. But the king gives no sign of recognition. Shakuntala gets shocked to see her husband forget her. Then she memorizes him:

Thy wedded wife am I, Shakuntala.

Gandharba rites of marriage joined us twain

A soul to soul, heart unto heart combin'd. (97)

Still the king rejects her claim that she is wedded to him. When they all insist that he is already wedded to her, he gets irritated and orders them to leave the court. Now mother also leaves her. So, Shakuntala becomes lonely. Menaka is watching all this from the heaven. Mother's pity drives her headlong earthwards. She lifts her fainting daughter and drops her safely in the citadel of Ksahyap Rishi. Then she returns back to heaven.

Meanwhile, a fisherman from the nearby city of the king's city fishes a huge fish. He brings it to the king's palace thinking that it will earn him a huge royalty. After short elapse of time from kitchen runs a startled visitor shows the king a golden ring with seal carved in flowery characters removed from the belly of the fish. As the king takes the ring, he is startled. Then he whispers in agony, "Shakuntala/ My darling wife" (103). He beats his grieving breast and flood of tears pours from his eyes down gloomy cheeks because he still does not know the curse of Durbasha. Now, he begs forgiveness. On the other hand, Shakuntala who is left in the hut of kashyapa Rishi in sleep oblivious wakes up. Finding herself in the hut similar to that of Kanva Rishi, she thinks herself to be in her home. But, soon she discovers that she is in the house of somebody unknown. As she gazes in wonder, the sage begins to speak:

Fret not, my child: of welcome be assured

In this my humble home. The gods decree

That for some reasons thou shalt here reside

And bear thy child and let him sturdy grow. (105)

The sage assures her that she is comfortable in this humble home. The gods decree that she will live here, bear her child and let him grow. Further he informs her that it is caused by the curse of Durbasha Rishi. Shakuntala gives birth to a child named Bharat.

Dushyanta is deeply in pain as he has denied recognizing his own wife. One day when he is sunk in aimless gloom, Lord Indra's charioteer comes to inform that God Indra has summoned him to fight against the Kalanemis, race of giants who is creating havoc in the heaven. Then he goes to the heaven. There Lord Indra speaks thus:

On earth great is thy fame; and millions  
Thy praises sing as king and warrior:  
Thee then I chose against the Kalame  
To war on our behalf, the demons foul. (108)

Lord Indra says him that he is famous on earth and he is praised by the people as king and warrior. So, he has been chosen to fight against Kalanemis to war on god's behalf. Finally Dushyanta gets victory on the war. So, he is welcomed by Aditi, the mother of god and all gods give him souvenir. The gods praise and sing, "Great is Dushyanta, great as Britraha!" (111). While returning from heaven, Dushyanta comes into a forest where he sees a servant playing with a chubby child, two years old. The child has large, lustrous eyes and raven hair that frames an oval face. The child is playing with a cub of tiger fearlessly.

King Dushyanta observes the act of child playing very enthusiastically. He is very fond of the child and his fearless activities. Then Dushyanta begins to think:

A child like this might mine have been, so fair,  
So noble with such lispings loveliness,

Pink-cheek'd and princely, leonine

Of heart as is the very cub he pets. (113)

He thinks that the child is noble like prince who plays with the fearful cub without any fear in heart. The king thinks this type of boy can be his son. The child is opening the mouth of the cub, undaunted by the sharp and long teeth. The king can not resist himself from going to the child. Then he asks his name and also his parents and home. The child gives the frank and clear answer that he has come from heaven. Amulet falls from the wrist of the child. The king tries to pick that amulet up but the child warns him not to touch it because touching it will mean death. But the undisturbed king seizes the 'Jantra'. Then wondering the servant speaks that amulet protects the child by magic and from other beings.

According to the servant the 'Jantra' protects the child from any kind of risks and dangers. Further he goes on:

The sage who tried this magic knot, ensures

This child alone or his own parents selves

May touch it, else, into a serpent turn'd,

Twill still to death hand unfamiliar. (114)

According to him the sage who has tied this knot in the wrist of the child ensures that the parents of the child only may touch it. If anybody other touches it, it will turn into a serpent and sting him/her. Then he asks the king if he is Dushyanta. The king replies that he is and murmurs 'Shakuntala'. The boy instantly replies that Shakuntala is his mother's name. Then the king overcomes with joy and with heartache too, and he can only stand and gaze and gaze in wonder motionless. Meanwhile, the servant rushes in haste to Kashyap's hut and informs Shakuntala about the event. Hearing this news, her eyes are filled with tears and she proffers a bunch of flowers. She is still more

lovely with grace of youth and full development of the body and heart. She is even more beautiful than starry skies at night.

Thus Dushyanta and Shakuntala meet again. Their eyes meet love and deep affection. Dushyanta in love expresses his faults thus:

My darling, O my love, Shakuntala,  
 My only love, forgive my cruelty  
 That robbed thee of thy rights and me of wife  
 Beloved. Let us all this misery  
 Forget, these wintry thorns, my soul benumb'd  
 By curse oblivious, remembering  
 The fairer days of love and ecstasy  
 And thinking only of the future bright. (115)

King Dushyanta shows great affection towards Shakuntala and begs forgiveness for his faults that is caused by the curse of Durbasha. He requests her to forget all past miseries for bright future. The sage Kashyap then blesses them, gives them wise advice that one should live with truth and that truth creates beauty. He also blesses them with happiness in their coming days. He says, Bharat, their son will rule the earth. He will be the king of most glory and the future ages will call the land of Bharat, and sing the story of its parent's love. Then Dushyanta, Shakuntala and Bharat returns to their hearth and home where great rejoicings and warm welcome cheer them.

## Chapter 4

### Conclusion: *Shakuntala* as a Hindu Myth

Laxmi Prasad Devkota's *Shakuntala* highlights the eastern thoughts, the eastern Hindu culture, social practices and heritages. In fact the whole epic is based on oriental myth. It presents the Hindu ethos-meditation and seclusion. There is the presence of God and the meditation of mortal human to get transcendence abandoning family, wealth and all the physical happiness. Vishwamitra is the character who renounces all the physical happiness in search of eternal happiness through truth. It is the pure Hindu way of transcendence; sitting cross-legged with sacred thread hanging across shoulder, spending whole life in forest as a 'sage'. Similarly, Hindu religion and culture is characterized by heroism, sense of sacrifice and devotion. Through his heroism, Dushyanta attains the level of god. He is summoned by god to defend them against trouble means he is more than ordinary. The relation between god and the human is very close and paradoxical at once. Sometimes, the gods become jealous of the human achievements, while they also exchange help in many times. The gods like Indra are scared of the penance of Vishwamitra and send Menaka to distract him from his task. But, they ask the help of Dushyanta to fight against the demons. The myth of *Shakuntala* acknowledges the human weakness in the matter of sex. Vishwamitra's failure shows that however hard we may try to control our passions, we cannot help succumbing to it ultimately.

The myth of *Shakuntala* clearly focuses the Hindu male chauvinism and male dominated ideology. Dushyanta marries a girl, makes her pregnant and leaves her in the name of war. Later he denies accepting her as his wedded wife. On the other hand, *Shakuntala* has to undergo deep humiliation and troubles. But her devotion still does not lessen. This is what women in oriental societies have been taught to be. Hindu

tradition is the strong supporter of fatalistic ideology. Fatalism is the faith in fate or destiny which is supposed to be insuperable by humans. Fatalism says present suffering is the result of the past deeds. Shakuntala accepts her destiny and moves where fate takes her. She accepts suffering, domination and sacrifice as her destiny. But the whole circumstances have been caused by fate which was effectuated by the curse of sage Durbasha. He hurls the curse upon Shakuntala but cannot undo that curse. When Shakuntala becomes pregnant, she is sent to the palace of Dushyanta. In Hindu societies women are not allowed to deliver the child at father's home, because pregnancy is a state that belongs to the husband's family.

Our tradition regards girls are the "debt that must be paid." Girls are not taken as the family members in her father's home after marriage. Here Shakuntala has to leave her home even in a difficult situation. Similarly, guests are taken to be as gods in Hindu society. So, proper care is taken of them. When Shakuntala fails to give proper attention to her guest, Durbasha, she is cursed by him. However, we can find happy ending of reunion where Dushyanta finally gets his lost wife Shakuntala and his son Bharat and they live happily then after. Harmony is the principle of Hindu mythology. This proves that Hindus can not tolerate separation. This indicates a sense of optimism and their view if life and nature. Myth of Shakuntala is based on religious as well as historical subject matter. Bharat is the son of king Dushyanta and Shakuntala who is considered as the founder of the country after whom India gets her name as Bharat.

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