

**Dynamics of Myth: Negotiating Greek Myth and Black Sensibility in Rita  
Dove's Poetry**

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**Abstract**

Myths and archetypes have been used as effective tools in modern literary criticism and critics like Alan Dundes, Kathryn Morgan, Edward B. Taylor, Allan Watt and Carl G. Jung have tended to interpret myth in terms of socio-cultural, anthropological, spiritual and philosophical significance. Alan Dundes in particular defines myth as a 'sacred narrative', whereas Allan W. Watts holds that myth is a complex construct of 'fact' and 'fantasy' which demonstrates the inner meaning of the universe and of human life as well. In the light of the aforesaid theorization, the present paper is designed to bring to the fore Rita Dove's mythic consciousness and her ingenious use of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone so as to explain the helplessness and sufferings of black women with archetypal significance.

**Key-Words:** Myth, Myth Criticism, Archetypes, Rita Dove

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Dove's Poetry****Dr. Bishnu Charan Dash**Associate Professor,  
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Myth is usually defined as a 'traditional story' that recounts the events from the past of a group of peoples, and as such, myths are by nature collective and communal. Myths tend to bind a tribe / an ethnic group or a nation together in terms of common psychological and spiritual activities and experiences. Myths therefore represent "deepest instinctual life" of a community and form a fundamental aspect of the same (Schorer 29). Alan W. Watts defines myth as a 'complex of stories' some of which may be based on facts, whereas some others are merely the products of fantasy (7). In human society, myth is a dynamic factor that transcends time and that unites the past and the present and marches toward the future (Guerin et. al. 148). As such, myth blends the traditional modes of beliefs of past with the prevalent values of present and thereby makes room for spiritual as well as cultural aspirations of future (148). Philip Wheelwright in this regard maintains that myth itself is the expression of a profound sense of togetherness that unites feelings, actions and "wholeness of living" (*Language*11). In fact, myth may take different forms such as legend, folklore and folktales. Even a single myth may have different versions among the people depending upon the cultural ambience that they live in. On the other hand, it is

also equally true that themes or images occurring in myths of people widely separated in spatial and temporal locations tend to have common meanings in them. Having analogous meanings, these images also elicit similar psychological responses. In this connection, Philip Wheelwright's explanation in *Metaphor and Reality* (1962) deserves mention here:

It is a discoverable fact that certain symbols such as the sky father and earth mother, light blood, up-down, the axis of a wheel, and others, recur again and again in cultures so remote from one another in space and time that there is no likelihood of any historical influence and causal connection among them (111).

The ancient Greek and Indian myths pertaining to Sky and Earth carry both sacred and secular connotations often associated with fertility cult and procreation as a divine experience. Water for instance not only stands for purification and redemption, but also points to the masculine energy of Sky in form of rain fertilizing Mother Earth. It is in this sense that Alan Dundes is apt in his observation that a myth is essentially a 'sacred narrative'.

As regards the importance of myth in social life, it may be noted that myth has the capacity to unite people with a common psychological bond regardless of their linguistic differences. In this respect, myth can be regarded as a universal narrative that transcends cultural and temporal barriers so as to elicit people's deep feelings thereby producing 'divine' experiences (Guerin et. al. 207). This viewpoint comes closer to Dundee's observation that myths are by nature sacred.

There is no denying the fact that myth is capable of many configurations accommodating a plethora of opinions and interpretations. It is often said that myth is neither pure ‘fact’ nor sheer ‘fantasy’ but an adroit combination of both of them. Kathryn Morgan in her *Myth and Philosophy: From Pre-Socratics to Plato* (2000) concentrates on dynamic interpretation of myth and philosophy and problematizes that there is a clear-cut distinction between ‘philosophical myth’ and ‘poetic myth’. Whereas philosophical myth attempts to appropriate the myth proper without literary ornamentation, poetic myth emphasizes the privileged relationship between the poet and the Holy Muse. Structural Anthropologists and Cultural Anthropologists tended to attribute fresh impetus to myth criticism. The French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss in his *Structural Anthropology* (1963) holds that a myth can be broken down into constituent units (mythemes) and that myth-making entails bundles of relations based on structures. Cultural Anthropologists like Edward B. Taylor tend to define myth in terms of transmission of culture from time to time, and from one race to another through constant negotiations.

Myth is inseparably tagged to religion in so far as it is associated with the origin of the world, various gods and goddesses and rites and rituals associated with them. Anthropologist J. G Frazer maintains in *The Golden bough* (1890) that human civilization gradually progressed from magic to religion and from religion to science thereby pointing to scientific orientation and appropriation of myths in modern times (711). Carl Gustav Jung on the other hand, associates myth with psychological interpretation on the basis of his theory of the “collective unconscious”. Jung argues that the collective unconscious constitutes the repository of racial memories,

primordial images, motifs and patterns of experience called “archetypes” – universal symbols shared by people across diverse cultures.

Rita Dove is one of the prominent poets in the contemporary African American literary scenario who has carved a niche of her own in the arena of poetry. As a prolific poet she has a number of poetic volumes to her credit that include *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980), *Museum* (1983), *Thomas and Beulah* (1986), *Grace Notes* (1989), *Mother Love* (1995), *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (1999), *American Smooth* (2004) and *Sonata Mulattica* (2009). Whereas quest for identity constitutes a core issue in her poetry, Dove is no less interested in history of the black which she details with the help of memory, nostalgia and myth and historical persons.

Dove’s mythological consciousness comes to the fore in the volume *Mother Love* (1995) which is based on the classical Greek mythological story of Demeter and Persephone. As the mythology reveals, Persephone, the only daughter of Goddess Demeter, is abducted by Hades, the king of the Underworld. The incident takes place when Persephone, playing with her friends, wanders off from the group. As she stoops to pluck a beautiful narcissus in her jovial mood, the Earth opens and Hades emerges with his intension to kidnap her. He manages to fulfil his desire and tempts to carry her to his underworld kingdom. Demeter, the mother Goddess of agriculture becomes inconsolable in her grief and therefore, renounces her duty in search of her daughter. As a result, agriculture fails on the Earth and the living beings suffer. The Olympian gods also disapprove of the abduction but they become more concerned about Demeter’s renunciation of her duties. At last, with the help of Zeus, she manages Hades to comply with her request to return her daughter. But as Persephone has already eaten some pomegranate seeds in the

underworld, the divine law prevents her from returning to her mother for good. Hades allows Persephone to go to her mother for half of the year while the remaining half is to be spent by her underground.

Dove's selection of the Greek myth as a theme of her volume bears much significance precisely because the forceful transportation of the blacks from Africa to various parts of the world presents a close parallel to the Greek myth of abduction. Persephone is abducted against her will while she tries to pluck a narcissus just as blacks leave their home in Africa under the backstroke of circumstances. Ironically, instead of plucking the flower, Persephone is herself 'plucked' by the King of the Underworld who can be interpreted in postcolonial perspective as the epitome of imperialism and gender hegemony. The myth of Persephone has since then assumed archetypal significance throughout the ages and it has remained preserved in the racial memory and collective unconscious of the people regardless of race, time and place. What is true of Persephone can be aptly applied to all helpless girls in every society with special emphasis on the condition of the black girls in the grip of gender hegemony and colonial oppression of the whites.

As has been stated earlier, the same myth may take different shapes depending upon the socio-cultural ethos of the people who share it. True to this characteristic feature of a myth, the Persephone-Demeter story also has slightly different versions. For instance, the name of the mother Goddess itself varies from Greek to Latin. While she is 'Demeter' in Greek version of the story, her name becomes 'Ceres' in Latin and in the same way, 'Persephone' in Greek becomes 'Proserpina' in Latin (Sukla & Sarangi 196, 200). However, Dove selects the Greek version of

nomenclature in her poems. She uses the Greek name ‘Hades’ for the king of the Underworld whereas it is ‘Pluto’ in popular Latin version and Lord Yama in Hindu mythology. Even in his mythical re-telling of the story in “The Pomegranate Seeds,” Nathaniel Hawthorne uses ‘Pluto’ as a luxurious king whereas in Hindu mythology he is depicted as the symbol of justice (“Dharma”) and righteousness: “They call my name Pluto; and I am the king of diamonds and all other precious stones” (Hawthorne 274). But, Dove in her foreword to the volume under question states that Persephone took “a few” pomegranate seeds in Hades’ palace, whereas Pat Righelato mentions it to be “seven” (142) and Hawthorne mentions it to be exactly “six,” for which she has to spend six months away from her mother: “For each of those six pomegranate seeds you must spend one month of every year in King Pluto’s palace” (315). All these variations suggest that myths have more often than not, multiple interpretations and bear different significance from culture to culture and from society to society.

The initial sequence of *Mother Love* consists of only one poem titled “Heroes”. The poem begins with a garden scene which is reminiscent of the garden from where Persephone was abducted. But instead of a narcissus, one finds ‘poppy’ here:

A flower in a weedy field  
make it a poppy. You pick it.  
Because it begins to wilt      (“Heroes” ll. 1-3)

The poet’s selection of ‘poppy’ instead of narcissus is noteworthy. As the serene atmosphere of the mythological period is not available now, poppy serves the purpose of representing the ‘waste land’ of the modern era. The plant being the source of opium, stands as

an archetype of lethargy and somnolence. Whereas in the myth it is Persephone who plucked the flower, in the present poem, Dove keeps the person unidentified, thereby giving the readers a scope to develop their own interpretation. Even the gender of the agent is unspecific as he/she is addressed as ‘you’ throughout the poem.

Dove’s taking recourse to the classical mythology also provides her an opportunity as a poet to appeal to larger womanhood. Her use of classical Greek mythology of mother-daughter relationship, in the words of Alison Booth, helps her coming out of set location and making the claim of a feminist woman (125). Her poem titled “Blue Days” for instance, contains a voice that is purely against the traditional male chauvinism. The poem criticizes the male’s jokes about females: “*why / do women have legs?*” Understandably, nothing has changed on the male chauvinism front over the centuries and the poet urges Demeter:

Demeter, here is another one for your basket  
of mysteries. (“Blue Days” ll. 13-14)

Dove’s Demeter in the above lines, is the archetype of all mothers, who possess a range of feelings like love, care and anxiety for their daughters. These mothers, while being extremely affectionate to their daughters, bear at the same time fear, doubt and curiosity regarding their future. Protecting their daughters from the evil eyes of the males is as challenging a task as rearing them up. And the poet offers Demeter to keep the mystery in mind (and to add it to her “basket of mysteries”) that the male psyche has not changed much right from the primitive days.



It is this untrustworthy nature of the males that the modern woman as an incarnation of Demeter advises her daughter to imbibe as the characteristics of an ideal daughter:

Remember: go straight to school.  
This is important, stop fooling around!  
Don't answer to strangers. Stick  
with your playmates. Keep your eyes down.

(“Persephone, Falling” ll. 9-12)

It is actually a mixture of love, care and fear that prompts the speaker to give such instructions. It is Persephone's separation from her 'playmates' (“strayed from the herd”) that provides an opportunity to the 'stranger' (Hades) to seduce her. The 'stranger' in this case, becomes the archetype of all evils, just like the strange colonial masters.

Along with the treatment of the crude male chauvinism, Dove comes out hand in hand with the established feminine critics in “Hades' Pitch”, a sonnet that depicts the opportunistic behavior of the males: Persephone is seduced by her abductor Hades in hell, and at the same time her uncle Poseidon takes advantage of her bereaved mother Demeter on the Earth:

She sighs  
just as her mother aboveground stumbles, is caught  
by the fetlock – bereft in an instant –  
while the Great Man drives home his desire. (“Hade's Pitch” ll. 11-14)

Both the mother and daughter are deprived of each other's company and affection. While Persephone sighs underground for her mother, the “Great Man” who ironically stands for masculine lust, takes the opportunity of Demeter's sadness to fulfill his wish. Hence, both of them fall prey to the male power and as Righelato puts it, both become the victims of a “double phallic wounding” (159).

By taking up the story of Demeter and Persephone, Dove has not only focused on the relationship of a mother and a daughter, but also the “relationships between mothers and daughters through the generations” with the help of myth and archetypal presentation (Lofgren 135). But she takes the liberty and allows Persephone to tell her side of the story while the original myth focuses only on Demeter’s grief. There is no doubt that Persephone found the initial separation from her mother very traumatic, but her trauma as an alienated daughter is similar to the multitudes of black girls and women who had the same fate in their lives. Dove’s mingling of the myth with the present provides an interesting reading as in the sequence “Persephone in Hell” where she represents Persephone as an American college girl who intends to have some fun away from home. But ironically enough, instead of having fun, she remains aloof from her peers in Paris. This is, however, the fate of every girl, as Dove mentions in her foreword “An Intact World” that there comes a point when a mother can no longer protect her child, when “her daughter must go to her own way into womanhood” (*Mother Love* vii) . And this represents the feminine sensibility of Dove.

The second part of *Mother Love* consists of twelve poems on the grief of the mother-daughter duo. Both of them are expressed in different forms and voices in this part just like the classical story of the myth oscillates between different personae. Added to the alternative voices of the mother and the daughter, other voices also interweave the narrative. These voices come out as impersonal narrative voices at some time, and become specifically African American at some other time. Pat Righelato further observes that the voices also indicate the autobiographical

presence of the poet herself” (148). The opening poem of the sequence “Primer” reflects the experiences of an ordinary black girl in an American semi-rural locality:

In the sixth grade I was chased home by  
the Gatlin kids, three skinny sisters  
in rolled-down bobby socks... (“Primer” ll. 1-3)

Chased by the “Gatlin kids”, the girl has no other option than running away. She knows it well what will happen if they catch hold of her (“Besides, I knew / they’d beat me up”). In order to avoid complications, she takes a long way home, but with a firm determination that she would retaliate once she grows up. For a helpless victim of racial oppression, this is the common mode of psychological adjustment: to pin a hope to do something, in retaliation of the injustice, when they would grow up.

The abduction incident has been satisfactorily articulated in the sonnet “Persephone, Falling”. Persephone stoops to pluck one narcissus, when the abductor emerges:

Sprung out of the earth  
on his glittering terrible  
carriage, he claimed his due.  
It is finished. No one heard her.  
No one! She had strayed from the herd. (“Persephone, Falling” ll. 4-8)

The “terrible carriage” though stands for the bright chariot of Hades, also indicates the terrible trans-Atlantic slave trade and the trauma of transportation of slaves from Africa to America.

Demeter’s predicament and her disconsolate suffering after the abduction of her daughter is revealed in “The Search”:

Blown apart by loss, she let herself go –  
wandered the neighborhood hatless... (“The Search” ll. 1-2)

In her pathetic condition Demeter defies all the cultural constraints and wanders around in such a way that “it was a shame” for the onlookers. The abduction incident is more poignantly depicted in “Persephone Abducted”: “She cried out for Mama, who did not / hear”. The speaker of the poem thereafter broods over the uselessness of philosophy or philosophical poetry after the event. Dove has successfully interwoven the mythology with the African American experience in “Protection” where Demeter is the alter ego of the typical black woman who has a preoccupation with her daughter’s “‘good’ hair”. Heavily worried, Demeter feels, in the state of hallucination, the presence of her lost daughter amidst nature:

Everywhere in the garden I see the slim vine  
of your neck, the stubborn baby curls...

(“Protection” ll. 3-4)

Here one gets a racial inflection in the character of Demeter who, as a traditional black mother, is overtly preoccupied with her daughter.

The above analysis of the Demeter-Persephone myth reveals that Rita Dove exercises her poetic sensibility and historical consciousness to poignantly articulate the sufferings of the Black. The volume *Mother Love* bears true testimony to Dove’s black feminine sensibility that works in conjunction with her mythic consciousness so as to bring to the fore the anxiety and angst, the fear and suffering of the black women. The Greek myth has been so adroitly employed by Dove that the sufferings of two individuals / figures of myth have been metamorphosed into the sufferings of the black women as a whole thereby justifying the universal significance of

myths that are reconstructed with novelty from time to time with archetypal significance regardless of society and culture.

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