

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2017.2.3.09>

## **The Mystic Utopia of Tales: A Study on Mythologies and Fairytales**

### **Prerona Das**

Completed her graduation in English from Kalyani Mahavidyalay and is presently pursuing her Masters.

### **Shilpa Dey**

School Teacher,  
Graduated in Journalism and Mass Communication,  
Pursuing Masters in English Literature

**Debalina Roychowdhury** is currently working as Senior Lecturer in English and In charge of Entrepreneurship Development & Placement Cell of Elite Institute of Engineering & Management and also Guest Professor in Indira Gandhi National Open University.

### **Abstract**

There is a confusion hidden in the readers of literature that mythology and fairytales are somewhat similar and serve the same literary purpose. Both of them owe much to human imagination in terms of their creation and presentation. Since time immemorial, both the genre has been enriching literature, art and creation. The two genres discuss about flowery unreal tales, but are they completely unreal? Both have been made use in the artistic and poetic creations but the hairline but serious differences are less discussed. This paper focuses to discuss about the two and their range that has not been discovered or not compared with their universal mate.

**Keyword:** Griselda, Merida, fairytales, Belaarsen, Babylonian, Medusa, Mythology

### **Introduction**

**The Mystic Utopia of Tales: A Study on Mythologies and Fairytales**

**BY**

Prerona Das, Shilpa Dey & Debalina Roychowdhury

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy (Shakespeare). It is a fact indeed that imagination has the deepest root in the soil of human culture. Starting from technological growth to tacit paintings or scientific inventions to lucid literature, all are undoubtedly offspring of human imagination. Fairytales results from imagination owing much to human dreams and mythologies results also from imagination owing much to human realization. The seed of has a connection with that of real life. It can be put in a way that reality can be carved out intensely from mythologies and mildly from fairytales.

What are mythologies? What do we know about fairytales? Does the two belong to the same genre? These are pertinent questions echoing through centuries. Fairytales are kind of short or long stories that foregrounds magic, fancy and utopianism. They are much like folk tales but with a universal appeal. On the contrary, myths are also stories that feature human belief, history and customs of a particular race. They are close to that of the legends but is not limited within the said realm. It gives an expansive scope for the study of human culture. Mythologies and fairytales are often confused or considered to be somewhat similar. An intense study of the two helps us to distinguish between the two and justify their individual prevalence among the readers of all the ages.

### **Mysteries of Mythologies**

A myth... is a metaphor for a mystery beyond human comprehension. It is a comparison that helps us understand, by analogy, some aspect of our mysterious selves. A myth, in this way of thinking, is not an untruth but a way of reaching a profound truth (Christopher Vogler).

What is myth? The very phonological utterance of this prospective word gives the feeling of some mystic presence behind a thick fog of illusions. Was myth just a mere form of creation by the much advanced brains or is a potential way to express the extravagant thoughts of the introvert self. The mythological tales has been there for ages showing us the darkest sides of the most illuminated civilisations. It is the mirror that spectacles the truth of all ages. Be it the struggles of Sita in Ramayana or the cries of Persephone in the hell of Hades, be it Manasha or Medusa, be it Indra or Zeus, myths unveiled it all.

A mythological story does not bind you within morals of the society and the do's and don'ts, rather it's like an open jurisdiction where you are free to judge all by yourself. You can clad Zeus with the glories of heroism or praise Ravana for his impeccable knowledge; it's all up to you.

The Mythological stories are not just mere tales of deception; it is the vast ocean of secrets laid open to be discovered. These stories not only designate the social structure of the era but also give a clear conception of the divisions of the society and the position of women in the whole structure.

The mystic tales are also an apparatus to cook the untold expressions. What history dejects mythology accepts with open arms. Be it the hints of zoophilia in Mahabahrata or the

**The Mystic Utopia of Tales: A Study on Mythologies and Fairytales**

**BY**

Prerona Das, Shilpa Dey & Debalina Roychowdhury

rape of Leda by Zeus, a myth has it all. Anything and everything that the society intended to hide has been unleashed by the daring myths. Maybe that is the reason why society fears to accept its presence and own it as a legitimate wing of history even after some of the prominent discoveries standing as the protuberant proof of the eminent myths.

Mythological stories found its prominence in the eyes of art and therefore could not be erased from the minds of the readers throughout the ages. Literary works, paintings, pottery, narrative, and epics, have kept the myths alive and in front of million eyes in the most imperishable and immortal manner as art values it all that society can't even dare to.

Myths evolved with time as per the changing society. It shifted slowly and steadily from the world of gods to the world of heroic mortals thus swiftly indicating the increasing power of kings over the society. Myths also portray the evolution of women in the society. While there was innocent Medusa who was transformed to a Gorgon as a punishment for being a rape victim, there is Ahalya transformed into stone after being physically close to Indra. Later we can also find the all destructive beauty like- Helen, who ruined the whole city with no weapons in hand. Even the Indian mythology demonstrates a great shift from the timid lady Sita towards an empowered empress Draupadi, from innocent Sati to the Adi Shakti Parvati.

Mythology is the fiction that speaks not the future but the past in the most uninterrupted manner. It is the history that the society has adopted but not accepted yet. If history stands with its own set of proof and dates so does mythology, then why couldn't it be accepted as a mainstream subject for study in schools and colleges? If the history of a civilization is worth knowing, so does the mythology of the same. The combined study of both can provide a clear picture in the collage of scrambled truths.

Mythology teaches us the most practical lessons of life. It instills that the world goes on with all its good and bad and if you can accept the good be brave enough to handle the bad because even the most generous hero is the villain from the aspect of the anti-hero.

Mythology amalgamating with some of the best of literary works brings in the epics with flavors of hidden truths and the essence of life. Mahabharata is a well-known epic; the moral extracts of which are bound in the covers of Gita, but my question lies here that can truth be bounded within limits. Maybe not and that is the reason why one can hear the best learning of Gita from even an inconvenient and not much appraised episode of Belaarsen upon which I would love to shed some light.

Belaarsen was the son of Ghatotkacha and the grandson of Bhīma. He was a brilliant warrior and blessed with the boon of three arrows by Lord Shiva. But Belaarsen promised his mother that he would participate in the war only if he felt the fancy to do so that too only to help the losing side. In the meantime, Lord Krishna went on asking everyone how long they would take to end the war all by themselves. Even the mighty Arjuna estimated that they would take 28 days. However, Belaarsen promised to conclude the war in a minute. Krishna felt the necessity to enquire the relevance of his words and disguised as Brahmin went to take a trial of the arrows of Belaarsen. The first arrow was meant to mark everything

**The Mystic Utopia of Tales: A Study on Mythologies and Fairytales**

**BY**

Prerona Das, Shilpa Dey & Debalina Roychowdhury

that he meant to destroy while the second arrow would mark everything that he wished to save. And finally the third arrow would destroy everything that the first arrow demarcated. Krishna realised that the arrows were infallible and that Pandavas wouldn't be safe from him, and therefore wished to abolish the threat at the very foundation.

Krishna applied his wit to justify that if he would support the losing side the other half would start losing and eventually he would be the only person left. He also knew that Belaarsen was a generous man and therefore asked him to sacrifice his blood in the battle field to which Belaarsen agreed instantly asking Krishna to reveal his true self. Belaarsen agreed to sacrifice himself on the condition that he would watch the war. Krishna agreed to his demand and lopped his head off mounting it on a pole next to the battlefield.

Eventually, at the end of Kurukshetra, the Pandavas argued amongst themselves to know who the best warrior. Krishna suggested them to ask Belaarsen as he has been witnessing everything from above. On being asked Belaarsen answered that all he could see was a spinning Chakra which was slaying everyone standing against Dharma and Goddess Mahakali consumes all the sinners as her sacrifice.

The simple one line answer of Belaarsen is the very zest of life, I believe. A myth not only teaches us moral lessons but also draws the very picture of life. The small mystic story of Belaarsen brings us the conclusion that life is a journey towards death and everything that comes during the expedition is mere experience. The so called 'dharma yudh' or the holy war caused death of many innocent people and animals that were at no fault and had nothing to do with the misdeeds of the royal folks. Then what was the cause of this mass devastation? Why did the innocent people suffer? Then how could one conclude that the war was solely for truth and dharma?

The only truth of life is death and mythology gives us the reason and strength to accept it and face it with utmost bravery. The cumulative thought that we can draw from mythologies of all over the world is that the circle of life goes on and that destruction is just the stepping stone of a new beginning be it in the form of a war or the Flood. The culmination of the frost giant Ymir led to the empire of Odin in Norse Mythology. The Flood in Christian, Babylonian, Greek, Egyptian as well as Indian Mythology was just the beginning of a brand new era be it through the hands of Noah or Manu or some other persona.

Mythology is a book left open to accept the judgments and criticism of all ages. It is the cup of knowledge with a hole beneath; the moment you seem to reach the brim, you find yourself at the very base. Mythology is like the immortal bird singing on the intricately carved "Grecian Urn"; unheard by innocence, pitied by knowledge, and praised by experience.

### **Trail of Tales**

If you happen to read fairy tales, you will observe that one idea runs from one end of them to the other--the idea that peace and happiness can only exist on

**The Mystic Utopia of Tales: A Study on Mythologies and Fairytales**

**BY**

Prerona Das, Shilpa Dey & Debalina Roychowdhury

some condition. This idea, which is the core of ethics, is the core of the nursery-tales (G.K. Chesterton)

Fairy Tales have been around for as long as we can remember. These tales were treasured and passed on orally through generations. So, they have been frequently reinterpreted in many cultures since they first originated. The most common fairy tales can be said as Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel, Little Red Riding Hood, Thumbelina, Beauty and The Beast and many more. These tales are mystical, wonderful and gets the imagination of children into motion.

These tales take us through a blissful journey in a dreamland which usually starts as “Once upon a time” and ends with “happily ever after” and somewhere in between a ‘damsel in distress’ and a kingdom is saved from an evil force by the handsome and young prince charming. In popular Bengali fairytales like ‘Lalkamal and Neelkamal’, ‘Patalkanya Manimala’ or ‘Shonar Kathi Rupar Kathi’ hovers the concept of ideal fairytale. Though there are some stories with exceptions like “Hansel & Gretel” which have the most famous witch-killer: Gretel. She transforms into the hero when the witch imprisons her brother. She kills the witch by outsmarting her and then frees her brother. Bengali Fairytales like “Vikram and Betaal” focus on the adventures of King Vikramaditya and his ghost friend which does not include any leading woman character, is undoubtedly an exception.

Fairytales resemble a dream life for people that they would want but, if we really look into the stories we will find them mostly unrealistic. The most critical aspect of these stories is how women are depicted here. They inject an unrealistic image of how so called ‘good women’ should look like or behave. All the leading women characters in these stories are extremely beautiful, young, behavior on point and belong to the aristocratic class if not by birth then later by marrying a prince or king or a person of that hierarchy. They are the obedient, modest and decent women in the stories. This submissive kind of characteristic reaches its peak in Charles Perrault’s Griselda. She is constantly abused by her husband throughout the story and she takes in everything without any complaint. Her total obedience is rewarded at the end where she is reunited with her daughter, gets back her power and position and at last gets the deserved respect from her husband. In reality not every girl accepts things this way and attains such a happy end. Instead stories that of “brave” are more acceptable where “Merida” saves her country without taking the help of any prince or king and finds the true meaning of being brave than the traditional fairy tales.

The popular term “fairy tale ending” *mostly gives us the idea of a happy ending.* Perhaps there will always be a question that why we need to change the ending into a good one? Maybe that is because many authors and translators seem to assume that this is what both adult and child readers want. The original versions of these kinds of stories from China, Japan, England, Italy, Mexico and many other countries from the world have been changed into a good ending which in actuality had sad, violent and sometimes even gruesome ends. In Hans Christian Andersen’s version of “The Little Mermaid” published in 1847, the incidents at the end of the story are way too darker than the Disney adoption in

**The Mystic Utopia of Tales: A Study on Mythologies and Fairytales**

**BY**

Prerona Das, Shilpa Dey & Debalina Roychowdhury

1989. In the original version; the mermaid and her sisters makes a deal with the sea witch where she can get back her tail by killing the prince –“Before the sun rises you must plunge it into the heart of the prince; when the warm blood falls upon your feet they will grow together again, and form into a fish’s tail, and you will be once more a mermaid ... Haste, then; he or you must die before sunrise.” But as a good princess is suppose to be bounded by morality, she is unable to kill the prince and earns herself a chance to do good deeds and raise to heaven. “The Bamboo Cutter and The Moon Child” is another example from Japanese fairytale. This story has a bitter sweet ending, where a bamboo cutter gets a baby girl in a bamboo stalk, which he raises of his own. She becomes a very beautiful maiden and is known as princess moonlight. Five eligible suitors ask for her hand but are unable to win her. The prince of the kingdom falls for her but she reveals that she comes from the moon, and she must return to her home. She gives the king a glass bottle filled with life potion which he takes to Mt Fuji and this is why Mt Fuji is still active till date. This is a story where the prince and princess does not get their happily ever after union and so can be classified as an exception.

As far as we can remember anything and everything related to fairytales are shown with prejudice where good always triumphs over evil, truth over lies. This can be seen in age old as well as new age fairy tales like “Harry Potter” series by J K Rowling. But these tales have changed during the course of time, culture and lands. The first set of western fairy tales were published in 1812 by Jacob and Wilhelm brothers as “Children’s and household tales” popularly known as Grimm’s fairytales. Though these tales were published as children’s stories but were severely criticized and later numerous changes were made as they were not considered suitable for the children. Cinderella killed her step mother so that her father could marry their house keeper instead. Not with the kiss of a prince but Sleeping Beauty woke up by the nudging of her newborn twins. She was impregnated twice by the monarch while she was unconscious. After many hurdles she gets to marry the person who violated her and they lived happily ever after. Meanwhile Rapunzel, gives herself away to her captor when – after having a “merry time” in the tower with her prince - she asks her fairy god mother – “Tell me, Mother Gothel, why are my clothes becoming too tight? They don’t fit me anymore.” And the stepmothers of Snow White and Hansel and Gretel were, originally, their mothers. So, according to Grimm’s version it was Snow White’s own mother who ordered the huntsman to “stab her to death and bring me back her lungs and liver as proof of your deed. After that I’ll cook them with salt and eat them” and Hansel and Gretel’s biological mother who abandons them in the forest to die.

Irrespective of the language, characters and different storylines, these tales breaks the boundaries and introduces its readers with a whole new world where they can go to any part of the world and explore the lands, cultures, people etc with their imagination. Every land has their own native fairy tales but some of these stories are reconstructed by the writers of other lands. For example- The literary Italian fairy tale “Penta of the Chopped-off Hands”

**The Mystic Utopia of Tales: A Study on Mythologies and Fairytales**

**BY**

Prerona Das, Shilpa Dey & Debalina Roychowdhury

was first written by Giambattista Basile in his 1634 work, the Pentamerone and later rewritten by the Grimm Brothers as “The Girl without Hands”.

The good characters in these stories always represent happiness, life, youth, future, beauty and unrelenting trust. Apparently evil is portrayed in a total contrast compared to their counterparts. They are not seen as youthful, happy, or lively. They give off the feeling of sinful, foul, old, crooked, wickedness and villainy. But it is not mandatory that a villain has to look like a villain. The evils were illustrated in any forms. In the fable “Little Red Riding Hood” the evil is a wolf. This was the time when faith and government in Europe was dominated by Christianity. Christians believe that wolves were servants of Satan. The concept of werewolf also emerged from here.

Russian fairy tales includes more wit than magic and are more realistic. There are many examples in these fairy tales that clearly shows the difference in class and economic status of the characters like “The Tale of Shemyaka's Judgement” and "The Goldfish," which is about a poor fisherman who spares the life of a goldfish who promises to grant his wishes in return. The fisherman's wife makes the fisherman ask more and more from the goldfish so that the wife can take advantages but in the end the goldfish takes everything back and they're left with what they had before. The economic difference is not restricted to any particular cultures or counties which can be assumed with the famous stories like “Hansel and Gretel”, “Jack and the bean stalk”, “Puss In Boots” etc where mostly the leading characters belong to the lower economic status of the society.

The title “Fairy tales” as we call them is actually quite misleading in context of the real write-ups of them, because few of the stories do, in fact have fairies in them, many of them revolve around the doings of kings, giants, ogres, imps and whatnot, and never even mention a fairy. So, no matter what the stories include, they teach us a lot more than people could ever imagine. But definitely considering the revised and known versions of the same, they are unrealistic and utopian. Reality is hardly connected with them. May it be leaf-fringed happy stories or the tales of horrible happenings - fairy tales appeal to the human imagination more and very less to the human intellect. But definitely two invincible points lie in the core of the subject. First, as Einstein said, If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales; imagination is the source of all great creation; Secondly, fairytales boosts human mind that good always win over the evil, which is a spur towards benevolence in this world full of odds.

### **Conclusion**

This world is but a canvas to our imagination (Henry David Thoreau) Be it mythologies or fairytales, imagination plays the key role in creating and depicting a different reality. It is different in a sense it is not straightforward or explicit. It owes much to the perspective of the readers how they correlate them with the reality at large. But definitely fairytales and mythologies are different in their inception and also for what they infer. It may be put in a way that, in spite of the same ingredients, both provide us with different taste as

**The Mystic Utopia of Tales: A Study on Mythologies and Fairytales**

**BY**

Prerona Das, Shilpa Dey & Debalina Roychowdhury

their grounding is distinct. Thus, fairytales and mythologies are not synonymous at all and both are stalwart in the world of literature bearing individual responsibilities to their readers.

#### References

- Thompson, Stith. *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology & Legend*, 1972.
- Briggs, K. M. *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature*, London: University of Chicago Press, 1967.
- Byatt, A. S. "Introduction", Maria Tatar, ed. *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, Tatar, Maria. *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*. London: Pk Press, 2001.
- Bascom, William Russell (1965). *The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives*. California: University of California, 2009.
- Bulfinch, Thomas *Bulfinch's Mythology*. New Jersey: Kessinger Publishing, 2009.
- Eliade, Mircea *Myths, dreams, and Mysteries: the Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*. Translated by Mairet, Philip. Harvill Press, 1960.
- Kirk, Geoffrey Stephen. *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*. California: University of California Press, 1973.
- Guerin, Wilfred L. Labor, Earl. Lee, Morgan. Reesman, Jeane C. Willingham, John R. *A Handbook of Critical Approach to Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.