



**IMAGINED REALITY: HARARI'S ANTHROPOLOGICAL
READING OF MYTH**



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ABSTRACT

The argument built up in this paper is based on Yuval Noah Harari's anthropological reading of the notion of myth discussed in his *Sapiens*. The paper tries to explore the roots of what is considered as popular culture that has been regulating and governing the life of masses and making them to perpetually adhere to certain beliefs, customs and traditions since time immemorial. It also attempts to reread the notion of fiction in the light of Harari's notion of imagined reality.

KEYWORDS

Imagined reality, fiction, myth, religion, belief system

RESEARCH PAPER

Before discussing and exploring the notion of myth as argued by Yuval Noah Harari it would be interesting and relevant to see what are the traditional connotations of the concept, particularly, how the concept came into existence and what role it has been playing in the human society, and at the same time, what are the underlying motives of the inventors of the certain sort of myth and what impact it makes on the masses. Basically, every society adheres to certain belief system which regulates controls and governs the life of the members of that society, and, consciously or unconsciously, the members of that society acknowledge and consent the power structure that stems from that belief system. In fact, belief system, may it be religious, cultural, social and even political, is nothing but the set of certain myths which have been cherished, consciously and unconsciously preserved and handed over to the coming generations. Therefore it becomes necessary to explore the roots of the notion of myth that involves the latent power to shape and condition the life of innumerable generations of people without any interrogation and skeptical gestures on the part of those people. What prompts or compels them to give tacit consent to the certain set of myths, which many a times, relegates them to the subhuman level or becomes the doctrine of subordination and exploitation, is the serious question which needs to be urgently addressed, and at the same time, the question like, why and how do the specific groups in the society dominate and rule the masses, is also very much pertinent while exploring the origin of the concept of myth and the power of myth.

Anthropologically speaking, myth has been playing significant role in the process of development of human society and, in fact it was, since ancient time, an innocent gesture of human being to perceive and solve the riddles and mysteries of nature, like, raining, lightening, earthquake, drought etc. which were beyond the reach of human intellect at that time. In these connection views of father of anthropology, E. B. Tylor, are significant to know the role of myth in human development:

A story that recounts purportedly historical events to explain how traditions, major doctrines, religious and similar nuclear concepts arose. The major protagonists in myth are deities. Myths probably were attempts on the part of early man to explain natural phenomena. The sun, the universe, the sky and the life after death are prolific sources of myth. An example of a functional myth is the American Indian notion that a fish buried in a hill of corn gave its spirit to the growing grain. By this myth, Indians could facilitate the process of growth although they did not understand it. (372-73)

The process of growing grain, as Tylor denotes, is putatively believed to be historical without any interrogation by the contemporary people. This is how the religious and cultural beliefs were formed according to Tylor, but, the interesting aspect of Tylor's view is that the myth is an attempt by the archaic man to explain the natural phenomena which was beyond his intellectual capacity. But, creation of various myths was very much necessary on the part of archaic human being to elevate himself and grow as human being. In simple terms, it may be said that creation of myth was the pre condition for becoming human from animal species, at the same time it was necessary to survive and depart from the animal world to which human originally belong. Therefore, we can see, in all the old civilizations of the world, myth plays a vital role in becoming and progress of that civilization. Another seminal psychologist-anthropologist, Erich Fromm, attempts to explain the concept of myth thus:

The myth like the dream, offers a story occurring in space and time, a story which expresses, in symbolic language, religious and philosophical ideas, experiences of soul in which the real significance of the myth lies. If one fails to grasp the true meaning of myth, one finds oneself confronted with this alternative: either the myth is pre scientific, naïve picture of the world and of history and at best a product of poetically beautiful imagination, or- and this is the attitude of the orthodox believer- the manifest story of the myth is true, and one must believe it as a correct report of events which actually happened in "reality". (122)

Fromm states that the mythic stories are believed by the orthodox people as true, which are in fact false, but, if these stories are considered to be true, then through politicization, a certain sort of ideological doctrines are formulated which germinate and support a

specific power structure. Fromm's argument regarding the notion of myth is significant to understand the process of myth- creation in even post modern times. Myth, as a matter of fact, is a product of human imagination that emerges as a reality, as Fromm points out, and which is believed by the generations, and the process continues. Such thought to be realities, which are actually the untruths, but govern and regulate the life of the people, are succinctly termed as imagined realities by Harari in his *Sapiens*. Harari has, probably redefined the notion of myth which has postmodern connotations, or more precisely if remarked, he has largely changed the notion of myth by describing it as imagined reality. This is the newer version of myth- creation which had never been perceived by the scholars in the domain of anthropology or mythology per se. Harari tries to reread the phenomena of myth-making on the backdrop of neo-capitalism and globalization which is deeply rooted in our day today life and has become an indispensable part. The traits of evolutionary anthropology could be noticed and deeply sensed in Harari's claims regarding the germination and paradigm shifts in the process of myth- making. He declares that cognitive revolution was solely responsible and instrumental for the emergence of the concept of myth, which metamorphosed human life. He argues:

Legends, myths, gods and religions appeared for the first time with the cognitive revolution. Many animals and human species could previously say, ‘careful! ALion!’ Thanks to the cognitive revolution, *Homo sapiens* acquired the ability to say, ‘The lion is the guardian spirit of our tribe.’ This ability to speak about fictions is the most unique feature of sapiens language. (27)

Harari, drawing upon evolutionary anthropology, has interpreted the concept of myth with new meaning to the human creativity. He further observes:

..... fiction has enabled us not merely to imagine things, but to do so *collectively*. We can weave common myths such as the biblical creation story, the dreamtime myths of Aboriginal Australians, and the nationalist myths of modern states. Such myths give sapiens the unprecedented ability to cooperate flexibly in large numbers. (27)

Ability to work together in order to achieve common goals, which, Harari claims as the outcome of cognitive revolution, is the most crucial characteristic of human being that distinguishes from the animal species. Myth is a shared phenomenon, hence, “Large

numbers of strangers can cooperate successfully by believing in common myths.” (30). Harari’s argument is very much pertinent in the current scenario to locate the reasons behind the questions like, why the ancient religions still prevail, and why the masses still believe in outdated and worn out religious doctrines. The role of myth is so pervasive, as Harari observes, “Any large scale human cooperation – whether a modern state, a mediaeval church, an ancient city, or an archaic tribe- is rooted in common religious myths.” (30). As Harari puts, gods, religions, nations, institutions, churches, temples, story of creation, law et cetera are the products of human imagination to which he terms as – imagined reality, brought into reality through collectively woven myths. He further argues:

Yet none of these things exists outside the stories that people invent and tell one another. There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings.

People easily understand that ‘primitives’ cement their social order by believing in ghosts and spirits, and gathering each full moon to dance together around the campfire. What we fail to appreciate is that our modern institutions function on exactly the same basis. (31)

Though myths are nothing but the fictional stories, but the ability of man to construct fiction is, anthropologically speaking and believing in the arguments of Harari, the only basis of the tremendous progress and advancement in every domain. Therefore, if at all, in real sense, one attempts the definition of human being, she would say – human being is fiction weaving species. Human beings have been striving, since time immemorial, to establish the imagined reality a reality through constructing myths, which give them power to work collectively and influence the coming generations to imitate in the same fashion.

Constructing fictional stories and convincing the others to make them believe is not a simple thing, Harari observes:

Telling effective stories is not easy. The difficulty lies not in telling the story, but in convincing everyone else to believe it. Much of history revolves around this question: how does one convince millions of people to believe particular stories about god, or nations, or, limited liability companies? Yet when it succeeds, it gives Sapiens immense power, because it enables millions of strangers to cooperate and work towards common goals. (35)

It can be argued, therefore, that all the manmade things like religion, god, caste, various institutions, social hierarchies, power structures, nations et cetera, are the results of imagined realities which have been constructed and established through myths, have been shaping and reshaping the world and naturalized by the dominant groups by exercising certain strategies and designs. To conclude, lets again see how Harari pertinently argues, “..... an imagined reality is something that everyone believes in, and as long as this communal belief persists, the imagined reality exerts force in the world.” (35). Therefore, myth as fictional story, myth as ideological construct, myth as imagined reality brought into reality, plays a pivotal role in the process of indoctrination and establishment of certain power structure. Keeping the role of imagined reality, i.e. myths, one must try to examine the scientific, historical- factual validity and authenticity of the notions like of god, religion, caste, class, nationality, religious and caste superiority, cultural superiority et cetera, and at the same time, one must try to pinpoint the mythical discourses and the dominant themes that have been ruling the literary and intellectual domains.

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