

Mythology as History: Sacred Nation, Patriotic Masculinities, and Devoted Femininities in Contemporary Popular Mythohistorical Fiction

ABSTRACT

This project studies a range of contemporary Indian mythology-based novels, graphic narratives, and films within the framework of a transmedia mode of popular textual production that I identify as the “mythohistorical”. I employ a combination of close textual analysis and an interdisciplinary theoretical approach to understand the contemporary popular and also locate it in a larger cultural trajectory of ideas, ideologies, and narrative practices from an earlier historical period. My central thesis is that the “mythohistorical” has emerged as a dominant mode of authoritative narration in our times that establishes a distinct discursive order cohering around cultural nationalism and religious devotion. To demonstrate this, I interpret hegemonic concepts of nationalism, masculinity, and femininity as interdependent, secular mythologies of the modern nation and show how they are constructed, conveyed, and constantly reinforced with the help of sacred discourses of mythology.

Essentially, the “mythohistorical” infuses an imaginary history with mythological symbolism to create a particular, recurrent narrative of the national past that it claims to be ‘authentic history’, in the process transforming the nature of mythology as well. This results in a mode of perception that imagines the nation in terms of a cyclical temporality that links the past and the present in seamless continuity, and an abstracted spiritual essence that (re)constitutes the national community as a religious community. Within this narrative universe, the soul of the nation is perpetually under siege and in need of protection from its citizen-devotees in specifically gendered capacities of “muscular patriotism” and “patriotic feminism”. The creation of such a moral order, in turn, elicits a mode of “patriotic consumption” that is instrumental in the construction of a new modern ‘self’ whose identity, ambitions, and relations with others are routed through the nation and are completely aligned with its perceived interests. Nevertheless, a smaller body of “contra-mythohistorical” texts disrupts the “mythohistorical” order of signification and challenges the latter’s fundamental assumptions and assertions. Overall, I examine popular culture as a field of fierce contestations between the “mythohistorical” and the “contra-mythohistorical” over crucial questions of identity, belonging, citizenship, and patriotism.

Keywords: mythohistorical, authentic history, patriotic consumption, nationalism, muscular patriotism, patriotic feminism