MYTHS AS DISCOURSE IN THE STRUCTURAL HERMENEUTICS OF LÉVI-STRAUSS

S. PANNEERSELVAM

The aim of this paper is to discuss myths as discourse as reflected in the structural hermeneutics of Lévi-Strauss. He is one of the important figures in the structural anthropology and his study of myths has a special significance in the contemporary society. An hermeneutical understanding of his study of myths would suggest that it is used by him as a form of discourse. Unlike many others who used myths as creation theories, by giving a religious interpretation, Lévi-Strauss considers myth as secular. For him, myths do not reveal any religious truths. This paper mainly deals with the structure of myths and how they are helpful in hermeneutical understanding. This paper also tries to throw some light on the tension between structuralism and phenomenological hermeneutics as discussed in the writings of Lévi-Strauss and Ricoeur. The first part of the paper deals with the general characteristics of myth and also with the two important theories of myth. This will serve as background for developing Lévi-Strauss's theory of myth which is discussed in Part two. Here an attempt has been made to explain how in the theory of myth developed by Lévi-Strauss, there is a movement from text to context in order to make myth a discourse. The position of Ricoeur, who is one of the critics of structuralism, is also briefly analyzed to see whether there is real tension between phenomenology of Ricoeur and structuralism of Lévi-Strauss.

I

The role of myths in human experience and reality cannot be easily rejected because, to some extent, it shapes human experience and reality. In modern social thought, myth has been playing a prominent role. For example, the creative hermeneutics of Mircea Eliade and the structural hermeneutics of

Lévi-Strauss prove how myths have relevance in the social context. Myths transcend time and also first order reference. Myths are always used as a form of symbolism and are also autonomous in character. One of the characteristics of myth is that it goes beyond limit-situation. thus extending invitation to the transcendence. It shakes up, distorts, or in some manner overcome the ordinary way of looking at the world. A myth which is structured or built on ordinary language transcends the ordinary language because of limit-situation. The Wittgensteinian notion that the limits of language means the limits of the world, may not hold good here as myths always go beyond the limit-situation. Another important charcteristic feature of myth is that it is autonomous in character. i.e., it is always self-justified. They are self-justified because we cannot check with the outside world in order to verify them. Though they borrow many words from our ordinary language, this borrowing has altogether a different purpose. The literal or ordinary meaning has no role to play in myths. They always conceal things. This definition of myth takes us to the next characteristic, namely that what a myth conveys cannot be known in non-mythical ways. There is a wide gap between mythical language and non-mythical language. Another important characteristic feature of myth is that there is always a process of "demythologizing" which means all old myths are refurbished, but continue to convey the basic truth they always have conveyed.

Myths are always used to represent the reality. It is used as a form of symbolism. A symbol is a visible thing that stands for or suggests something invisible. They always point beyond themselves. Symbols open up new dimensions of reality for us that would otherwise remain inaccessible. Mircea Eliade, for example says that symbol reveals certain aspect of reality. "Images, symbols and myths are not irresponsible creations of the psyche; they fulfill a function, that of bringing to light the most hidden modalities of being."[1] Thus myth is a basic symbolic form that shapes itself in the human psyche. Myths are, sometimes strongly structured and are logical; sometimes it is purely historical and thus pre-logical in character. It may be a revelation or deception, a real or fictional one, an archetype or stereotype. It may talk about gods, or about men or about ancestors. But what is important is that how these myths are interpreted in the social thought and whether they have any relevance in the social context.

Two main theories of myth are suggested: the critical theory and the applied theory. In the critical theory, we deal with our basic assumptions about myth. This theory deals with how the myths are to be studied and used. Thus it is a prescriptive study. Mircea Eliade, Lévi-Strauss, Malinowski are some of the thinkers who belong to this group. The creative stories of Eliade, the strongly structured stories of Lévi-Strauss and the pragmatic theory of Malinowski point to answer the question namely, how myths are produced and how they are to be studied in relation to creation etc. They talk about how to reconstruct the original meaning. In the second theory, we apply the term "myth" to use the ideas of myth. In other words, it deals with application. A conceptual foundation is not the subject matter of this study and it mainly deals with application of myth in different fields like arts, literature, politics etc. For example, Alfred Rosenberg and Rudolf Bultmann are representative thinkers of this group. In the critical theory of myth, one can see the attempt made by the supporters to reconstruct the original meaning. For example, Eliade argues that myths have no other function than to explain how something came into being.[2] He, while analyzing the structure of myth argues in support of primitive mythologies and says that most of the Greek myths were recounted and hence modified, adjusted and systematized. For him, myths become the exemplary model for all significant human activities. Thus in the critical theory, we see the relation between myth and society, which is explained through a proper conceptual basis.

II

Lévi-Strauss is one of the important figures in developing the theory of myth by relating it to the society. In his writings we can see the role of functionalism, though he is not in full agreement with it as because it neglects history. Functionalism, like structuralism, is tied to the synchronic point of view; it seeks to explain the practices it comes across in terms of their everyday social function. Each practice is a part whose "value" lies in the place it can be known to occupy within the whole. Thus it is simple structuralism. Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski, Rousseau, Marx, Freud, Saussure, Trubetskoy and Jakobson influenced Lévi-Strauss considerably. His interests are diversified. He wrote on various themes like kinship system, the theory of primitive classification and totemism, the most important being the study of the theory of myth.

According to him, myths are "strongly structured stories". How does it differ from a tale? His answer is as follows:

> In the first instance, the tales are constructed on weaker opposition than those found in myths. In the second place--and precisely because the tale is a weakened transposition of the myth--the former is less strictly subjected than the latter to the triple consideration, of logical coherence, religious orthodoxy and collective pressure. The tale offers more possibilities of play, its permutations are comparatively freeer, and they acquire a certain arbitrary character.[3]

Thus he is different from Eliade who regarded myth as a sacred story and relates it to an event that took place in primordial Time.[4] Eliade says that the cosmogonic myth is true because the existence of the world is there to prove it and similarly the myth of the origin of death is equally true because man's mortality proves it.[5] Thus the actors of myth, according to Eliade, are Supernatural Beings. This is not acceptable to Lévi- Strauss. First of all, he is careful in disassociating myth from rituals. In *The Naked Man*, he explains how myths are associated with the teleology of mind. Secondly, for him myths do not reveal any religious truths and deploy no supernatural power. Thus myths are secular for Lévi-Strauss. The notion that myths are structured stories is important for him. As a structuralist, he was very keen on defining myths in terms of structure. For him, structure is a primordial fact and with structure we always reach fundamental levels of human existence. This is the reason why he wants to maintain the term "structure" while defining myths. Structuralism stands for the ability to analyze individual myths into constituent units. This "strong structure" involves analysis. The importance of myths can be better understood if they are conceived only as strongly structured stories. In *The Naked Man*, he explains the relation between myths and society in this way: "Myths teach us a great deal about the societies from which they originate, they help us lay base their inner workings and clarify...beliefs, customs...they make it possible to discover operational modes of the human mind, which have remained so constant over the centuries and are so widespread."[6] An interesting feature of his theory of myth is that he accepts the original intended meaning of the theory of myth and tells us how we reconstruct the meaning through their functions. He maintains that the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction.[7] But what is interesting is that since each would be solution generating another

contradiction, they fail in their purpose. Lévi-Strauss says that this failure is admitted in the myths and there precisely lies their function. Thus telling of a myth is a way of telling oneself that however far one pursues the dialectic, there is no guarantee that it would lead to absolute knowledge.

.   For Lévi-Strauss myths like art, have a function of reconciling on the imaginary plane those social contradictions which cannot be resolved on the real plane. In other words, myths for him, are therapeutic by nature because they deal with something which societies might otherwise keep repressed. They always stand in a dialectical relationship to the social and the economic. Lévi-Strauss has really understood the significance of myths as evidence of a society's way of understanding the world around it. Myths have no author and they exist only as they are incarnated in a tradition.[8] In this context, Lévi-Strauss asks the important question, namely, how these myths are chosen. He answers that myths which serve as reference or starting point, are arbitrarily chosen and they allow the logical transformation from one to another. He observes : "Mythology confronts the student with a situation which at first sight appears contradictory... There is no logic, no continuity. Any characteristic can be attributed to any subejct; every conceivable relation can be found. With myth, everything becomes possible."[9] Roland Barthes's view on this, is important. He uses the term "myth" in a deliberately tendentious way to refer to systematic abuse of the process of signification. For him, there are no limits as to which objects may be so absurd. "Anything can be a myth? I believe it can, for the universe is infinitely suggestive. Every object in the world may pass from an enclosed, mute existence to a spoken state, open to approriation by society, for no law, natural or not, forbids us to speak of things."[10] For Barthes, there are two ways in which myth can be shown to act to conceal a system of class domination. One is that in myth what are expressions of definite social forms become represented as natural and inevitable occurrences and in the second, myth eclipses the conditions of its production. Commenting on this, Lévi-Strauss says that there is always an underlyng structure common to all myths everywhere. His analysis of myth goes as follows: Each myth is divided into its constituent elements, otherwise known as *mythemes* and then are classified in terms of their "functions" within myths. Finally, all the various classes of functions are connected with one another in the overall explanation of the structure of the myth.

Lévi-Strauss compares his study of myth with that of musical composition and shows the similarities between musical harmony and the imaginary, social or cosmological harmony in myth. Music and myths are "machines for suppressing time", eventhough both, have to unfold in real time, which is at the time of their performance. He says that an orchestral score "suppresses" time by encapsulating it within a sphere that makes possible an indefinite number of actual performances. The temporal dimension of music, as of myth is "reversible" or "non-cumulative" in contrast to the "statistical" or "cumulative" character of historical time. Thus for Lévi-Strauss, music and myth express *langue* in its most accessible form. His comparison that both music and myths as narratives when actually played or told, operate through the connection of two orders of relation, horizontally and vertically. To him, myth serves as his reference or starting point for his detailed study of myth. Since myths themselves generate other myths, they allow transformation. The messages myths convey may have little apparent coherence. The primitive mind is a bricoleur improvising with odds and ends. Lévi-Strauss describes the primitive man as bricoleur. Myth is produced by the activity of bricolage thinking where the old half-forgotten stories appear in new form as new stories. Hence the literal sense of the statement is not important. Lévi-Strauss asks an important question namely, whether myths have some common structure and answers affirmatively. He says that if we see the original intended meaning of a theory, we are able to construct the meaning. How is it possible? It is possible by consulting the author's other writing. Thus through such comparison and consultation, one can understand, interpret and improve the author's ideas. This is inevitable because one must know that the plain meaning will not be known or can never be known. This means that myth is not a mere study of the text, but text in context, informed by intention. Thus two points are to be taken into account, according to Lévi-Strauss. The context and the authorial intention which shapes the structure of the myth. A close study of this would reveal one thing. For him, there is always a movement from text to context. This means that a text has to be studied only in relation to the context. It has been stressed by Lévi-Strauss that context plays a special role in determining what is said in a theory. The context is important not for explaining the text, but for our understanding of it. In other words, it is not a mere explanation, but an understanding which is possible through the context. The understanding and explanation which are often considered as a paradigmatic distinction held by

Dilthey and others, are transcended in Lévi-Strauss. For him, understanding and explanation are not opposed antithetically. Thus context alone helps us to recover the intentions of the author. It may be explained as follows :

| text | $\longrightarrow$ | context | $\longrightarrow$ | recovery of intentions |
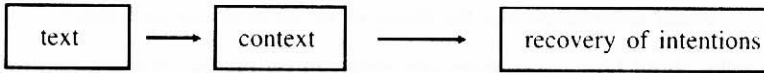
It has been argued by many that there are some changes with regard to Lévi-Strauss's earlier and later conceptions of myth. This change has not affected his general and overall conception of myth. There is some consistent element in both the conceptions. For example, his analysis of the principle of binary opposition as the origin of structures is maintained by him in both places. It is used both as a way of identifying the structural components of myth, and at the same time as a mode of confirming the structural analysis. A close study of *Mythologiques* will reveal this. He has explained how each myth serves as a sign rather than a complete order of signification. Myths according to him, cannot be studied in isolation. In other words, each myth is used to provide a clue for explaining the structure of another and the process goes on. Binary opposition is used by him both as a way of identifying the structural components of myth and the same time as a mode of confirming the structural analysis. Thus he talks of "spiral movement" as a method for decoding myths. The following observations in *The Raw and Cooked* are important in this context :

> ....every myth ultimately has its origin in an individual creation....but in order to move to the level of myth, it is necessary precisely that a creation does not remain individual; and that in the course of this transition it essentially discards those features with which it was contingently marked at the outset, and which can be attributed to the temperament, talent, imagination, and personal experience of the author.[11]

The study of the distinction he makes between language and myth shows that his position is somewhat similar to that of the Saussurian distinction between *langue* and *parole*. To some extent, Lévi-Strauss has assimialted the distinction between the individual and the social as found in Saussure. He writes :

> Although the possibility cannot be excluded that the speakers who create and transmit myths may become aware of their structure and mode of

operation, this cannot occur as a normal thing, but only partially and
intermittently. It is same with myths as with language; the individual
who conscientiously applied phonological and grammatical laws in his
speech, supposing he possessed the knowleldge and virtuosity to do so,
would nevertheless lose the thread of his ideas almost immediately.[12]

He talks about how oppositions are analyzed by mythic thinking into pairs like
hot and cold, high and low, east and west, raw and cooked, wet and dry, sun
and moon, day and night, near and far and man and woman. The last four of
these oppositions, operate in the group of myths. All the myths are organized
by the pair of opposites. This notion of binary opposites play an important role
for Lévi-Strauss. He is of the view that when any one of the polarities is stressed
and other neglected, the problem comes. What Lévi-Strauss is trying to say is
that when there is structural equilibrium among men and women, individual and
society, then there is no disturbance. In the structural anthropology of
Lévi-Strauss, the *mytheme*, the element of mythological significance is
constituted by the binary relation between relations, a resemblance between
differences. The differences are those between the contrary opposites that figure
in the surface structure of the strong. But it is only the analogies between these
pairs that yield the structure. The structured study of myths have an important
signification because for him they are helpful in understanding societies. But the
structural method cannot be demonstrated by reference to one or two. In all the
four volumes of *Mythologiques* Lévi-Strauss tries to explain how structural
method is a difficult method to operate and has also shown the difficulty in
demonstrating the structural analysis. In the structural anthropology of Lévi-
Strauss, the basic idea is that the institutions such as kinship and social
organization like mythical beliefs are structured according to the fundamental
organizing principles of languages. Myths are used by him to denote the ways
of thinking about order in human life. Lévi-Strauss makes it clear that myths
are formed out of ideas, concepts, proverbs, maxims etc., and that a myth is an
assembly of odds and ends. Myths do not have a centre or absolute origin or
beginning. Thus there need not be any unity among myths. Everything begins
with structure, configuration or relationship.

Lévi-Strauss's concept of myth has helped Ricoeur to develop his
hermeneutic theory. One of the criticisms of Ricoeur against structuralism is

based on the concept of myth developed by Lévi-Strauss. It is maintained by the structuralists like Lévi- Strauss that a sign must not be defined in terms of some object for which it stands, but rather in terms of its relation to other signs within the system of which it is a part. But Ricoeur says that myths can never be considered purely as an interlocking self-sufficient system of relationally positioned signs. The reason is that myths talk of something about the world which are objects of a structured investigations. Some like Bleicher claimed that myth functions as a specific kind of discourse. There is hermeneutic element involved in myths and also sense and reference. The "mythemes" isolated by structural method are expressive; they talk of human phenomena such as birth, death, marriage and incest.[13] In one of his replies to Ricoeur, Lévi-Strauss makes it very clear that anthropology including structural anthropology, rests on hermeneutic understanding. But it is also argued that his position comes close to that of the classical hermeneuticians like Schleirmacher or Dilthey than that of Gadamer or Ricoeur. For example, Lévi-Strauss and Schleirmacher held the view that understanding of a historically remote people is facilitated by a shared human nature. Though this is also correct, while retaining the view that explanation and understanding are not antithetical, he is close to Gadamer and Ricoeur. Dilthey considers this distinction a paradigmatic one. It is true that Ricoeur is not in full agreement with Lévi-Strauss.[14] Every language has a unique pattern, the units of which can be identified only in terms of their relationship to other units in the same language, says Lévi-Strauss. The claim here is that the institutions and practices such as kinship, social organization and myths are structured according to the fundamental organizing principles of language. Ricoeur shows the limitations of structuralism but admits the need for structural analysis. The fact that Ricoeur accommodates the structural analysis in his hermeneutics shows that he has not totally rejected structuralsim and allows the elements of it to operate in his phenomenologial hermeneutics.

NOTES

1.   Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, (London : Harvill, 1961), p.12.

2.   Mircea Eliade, *The Quest* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 29.

3.   Lévi-Strauss,*Structural Anthropology*, vol. ii, (New York : Basic Books, 1976), p. 128.

4.   Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York : Harper and Row, 1963), p. 5

5.   *Ibid.* p. 6.

6.   Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man*, (New York : Harper and Row, 1981), p. 627.

7.   Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, vol. i, (New York : Basic Books, 1963), p. 229.

8.   Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, (London : Cape 1970), p. 18.

9.   Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, vol. i, p. 208.

10. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, (London : Paladin, 1973), p. 216.

11. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, p. 11.

12. *Ibid*

13. Joseph Bleicher (ed.) "Ricoeur's Phenomenological Hermeneutics", in *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 226.

14. Paul Ricoeur, "Structure and Hermeneutics" in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, (Evanston : Northwestern University Press, 1974).