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Hercules' Labours: A Historio-Literary Study

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ABSTRACT

The stories of Hercules are some very popular myths all over the world. This popularity indicates the greatness of their literary value. More than this literary greatness, these stories have greater significance in the field of history. Bringing together both the literary and the historical perspectives, this essay aims to throw some light on the historio-literary suggestions that these stories make especially to the serious readers.

Keywords: *Hercules, Labours, Myths, History.*

Myths are not simply unbelievable stories of men, gods and monsters. They are literature in form, and history in content. They bear significance in multifarious levels and deserve exploration as important fields, at least, of literature, history, sociology and theology. In many universities myths are even studied as a separate and complete academic discipline. Many scholars have even attributed to myths the maternity of several branches of knowledge such as literature, history and religion. Professor of Comparative Mythology, Joseph Campbell found myths as dignified as 'masks of God' (Campbell 6). The great psychologist, Carl Jung, regarded myths as the doorway to approach the collective sub-consciousness of the whole human civilisation. A glorious poet and professor of poetry at Oxford University, Robert Graves, has indirectly referred to as many as twelve offshoots of mythology:

1. Philosophical allegory as in Hesiod's cosmogony
2. Axiological explanation of myths no longer understood as in Admetus's yoking of a lion and a boar to his chariot.
3. Satire or parody, as in Silenus's account of Atlantis.
4. Sentimental fable, as in the story of Narcissus and Echo.
5. Embroidered history, as in Arion's adventure with the Dolphin.
6. Minstrel romance, as in the story of Cephalus and Procris
7. Political propaganda, as in Thelesus's Federalization of Attica.
8. Moral legend, as in the story of Eriphyle's necklace
9. Humorous anecdote, as in the bedroom farce of Hercules, Omphale, and Pan.

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10. Theatrical melodrama, as in the story of Thestor and his daughters
11. Heroic saga, as in the main argument of the Iliad
12. Realistic fiction, as in Odysseus's visit to the Phoenicians (Graves 12).

Several of these offshoots are actually the progeny of the union of history and myth. Robert Graves has coined two good terms for them: embroidered history and realistic fiction. Many scholars over the world have interpreted mythical events as embroidered history which has been handed down from generation to generation under the cover of 'leaf-fringed legend(s)' (Keats 663). These legends are the common property of literature, history, anthropology and religion. Even sometimes the scholars like Kalim Khan of west Bengal regard myths as a part of philology. Then they begin to explore myths in the light of etymological meanings of mythical terms and they find undiscovered history enveloped in those terms.

This refers to one patent fact that mythical legends are very often a condensation of history in a different shape. Now we shall try to see the nature of that condensation by anatomising a few Greek legends. Let us examine the legends of Hercules' labours for the purpose.

Hercules is the Roman name for Greek Heracles. The English people prefer Hercules to Heracles taking up the name from Roman tradition. A renowned English mythologist, Betty Radice, says that Hercules was the most popular of all Greek heroes, who was worshipped all over Greece particularly in the Argolid and Southern Greece (128). Several legends say that he was the son of Zeus and Alcmene who was the wife of Amphitryon. Hercules showed his potentiality while a baby by strangling two snakes which Hera had sent to kill him in the cradle. All his fame and dignity centre around his strength and courage. The most famous of his heroic feats were his Twelve Labours which he had to perform as a service to the sickly king Eurystheus of Argos. It is said that he had to do this service to Eurystheus as an act of expiation after he had killed his own children in a fit of madness sent by Hera.

The twelve labours include:

1. He killed the Nemean Lion, which had an invulnerable pelt. Hercules strangled it with his bare hands and flayed it. Most representations in classical art show him wearing the skin of that lion.
2. He killed the hydra living by Lake Lerna in the Peloponnese. The difficulty of the killing was that as one head was cut off two others grew. Hercules succeeded to kill it by burning the head just after cutting.
3. He caught held of the golden horned hind of Ceryneia dedicated to Artemis and carried it off alive.
4. He carried on his shoulders the gigantic beast, the boar of mount Erymanthus alive and carried it back to Mycenae.

5. He cleaned the filthy stables of Augeas, the king of Elis, in which as many as five thousand bulls were living. He cleaned them in a single day by diverting the river Alpheus through them.
6. He expelled the fabulous Stymphalian birds living in Arcadia.
7. He killed the fire breathing Cretan bull at the request of king Minos.
8. He captured the man eating mares of the savage king Diomedes of Thrace.
9. Hercules made war on the amazons and captured the girdle of their queen Hippolyte.
10. He stole the cattle of the three bodied giant Geryon from the extreme west and drove them back to Greece.
11. He captured the monstrous dog Cerberus which guarded the underworld. Hercules brought it up from the hell.
12. He collected the golden apples of Hesperides from the west end of the earth where Atlas is condemned to hold up the sky on his shoulder. Hercules took over the burden and Atlas fetched for him the golden apples defying the watch of the dragon. (Radice 129)

Now if we look into these twelve events, we may feel amazed to see the rich treasure of historical facts, information and general truths lying condensed in them. First of all, let us consider the word 'labour' commonly used to denote these events. These twelve events are simply called twelve labours, not twelve adventures, nor twelve heroic feats, nor twelve great deeds. Nothing of glory or heroism is attached to the word 'labour'. The fact that these great deeds of the most popular hero Hercules are not dignified with a glorious name or term is what invites thoughtful interpretation.

The unbridgeable gap between the greatness of these heroic deeds and the ignoble word 'labour' to denote these deeds is quite illogical and really bewildering. It raises a serious question in every thoughtful reader's mind. Let us propose here one possible interpretation of this gap on a historio-literary basis. The interpretation, we hope, will present not only an explanation for the aforesaid gap, but also, a picture of the then Greek society in terms of power structure, politics and ethics.

According to our interpretation, these stories of Hercules' labours are some windows to provide a close view of the ancient Greek society. All the versions of the stories of the labour of Hercules show that Hercules was a man great in strength, but not great in social status. He was to serve others, not was to be served by others. He had to undertake all these twelve great feats of labour as a service to the weak and sickly king Eurystheus. It was his service to the king Augeas that he cleaned his filthy stables. So the people of power of the ancient Greek society did not find it necessary to use any word connoting glory or greatness to denote these jobs of servitude. It implies that the then society of Greece prized the labour and the strength of people simply with some hollow praises, not with anything great as a reward, nor by conferring any rank of social dignity. The power structure of the society was so impenetrable that even the mightiest man of the

time could not penetrate it to find his place in the royal court, or among the lords of the Pandemonium, and therefore had to remain almost a servant of a king or a queen. It should be mentioned here that sometime after the service to this king, Hercules had also to serve the Lydian queen, Omphale (Radice 129).

Again, if we judge these twelve labours in pure ethical standard, we may get a historical picture of the ethical outlook of the then Greek society. It is surprising that his tenth and twelfth labours are simply stealing and the ninth one is vulgar and heinous in any standard of humanism. In the tenth labour he stole the cattle of the three-bodied giant Geryon. In the twelfth he stole apples of Hesperides. In the ninth labour he took off a lady's garment, the undergarment of the queen Hippolyte. It is almost unbelievable that the mightiest of mankind did so heinous and so mean jobs in his life.

However the Greeks did not contempt him for such heinous activities. It suggests that the ethical sense of the then Greeks was different. These stories of Hercules' misdeeds (not actually any great deed) make it obvious that the Greeks, blind in support of heroism, did not regard an act as stealing if it referred to one's stealing from anywhere other than their own state. So stealing apples from the far west near the Atlantic was not an act of theft in the eyes the Greeks, because for that theft none of their state or nation was losing the apple, rather they were gaining it. Similarly stealing cattle from Geryon living in the west, sometimes identified with Spain (Radice 120), was not sinful at all to be called stealing, because the owner of the cattle was not anyone from Greece.

This attitude shows that the king or the queen, in other word, the people of power set the rule of ethics in the Greek society then. In these cases of Hercules, it was king Eurystheus of Argos who set the tasks for Hercules and the king's desire was adequate justness for undertaking the task. The king assigned Hercules the job of stealing the cattle and then stealing turned into a virtue. The king prescribed it as an act of expiation of his sin that Hercules would have to take off the girdle of a queen. Hercules did it and it helped him to wash off his sin. Then stripping off a lady's undergarment also became an act of virtue because the king's desire made justified it as a virtue. The legends say that this was the perspective of ethics during the Dorian or Achaean time of Greek civilization.

These three events of Hercules's labours also reveal the attitude of the Greek people of that time to other nations. The cattle wanted by the king Eurystheus were the property of someone of Spain, not that of any Dorian or Achaean. Therefore to possess it by anybody was definitely unjust and worth incurring damnation, by the standard of the then Greek ethics. On this ground the owner of the cattle was regarded as somebody evil and malevolent termed as 'giant'. It shows that possessing what the Greek king desired, by all standards of Greek ethics, was a sin and a damned devilish act. Some Historians have also referred to such attitude of the then Greek toward the other nations and the resultant ethical weakness of the Greek. A. R. Burn has shown how piracy became a source of national income in the Greek world (Aegean) in the 13th century BC (Burn 48-

49). Burn refers to the Iliad and proves historically that the phrase ‘sacker of cities’ was a title of honour when the city was non-Greek and the best way of increasing one’s wealth was to seize the wealth especially belonging to one non-Greek (50). In line with these historical practices, here also we see, as the king Eurystheus desired the apples, those who were keeping watch over them were regarded as dragons, an agent of evil power. But keeping watch over any possession should be considered as one’s unquestionable right and one protecting that right should be treated as a hero, not as a dragon. The Greeks then thought otherwise, as the legend of Hercules’ collecting the apples from Hesperides’ garden suggests. They thought that the foreign power that keeps watch on something desired by the Greek king must be an evil power either of a dragon or of a giant. This was the ethical attitude of the Greek as these stories of Hercules convincingly suggest.

This heinous imperialistic attitude of the Greek to the other nations is despicably inhuman in the legend of Hippolyte. Hippolyte was the queen of amazons, the valorous women of a nation of south-west Asia. They had such a patriotic zeal that they even did not hesitate to amputate their right breast to ease holding the bow in the battle against the Greek invaders. They had driven off the invaders with such spirit of heroism. But when Eurystheus found Hercules, the mighty man, he set him against the amazons. Hercules defeated the amazons and put their queen to utmost ignominy by stripping off her girdle. This was the heinous celebration of the Greek triumph over such a patriotic nation of Asia. The story gives us a frightening picture of barbaric cruelties made by the Greek in the countries conquered.

Moreover, this Hercules-Hippolyte legend does not seem to bear adequate historical truth. It is not easy to believe even in the form of myth that a single man, who had little background as a soldier and who had the experience of joining a battle only once in the past, could defeat single-handed a nation as heroic as the amazons. Circumstances suggest that the triumph recounted in this legend is actually an outlet of the fancy of the nation that if they could defeat the amazons they would humiliate them in such inhuman way. But whatever it is- fancy or reality- the legend bears this ugly truth about the Greek attitude to other nations that they treated even the patriotic people of other nations merely as beasts and buzzards. They treated the queen of one such nation as a witch or a damned creature. The legend gives us such formidable picture of the wolfish nature of the then Greek people.

At least of one of the stories of Hercules’ labours involves simply fun and sport. It was the catching of the golden horned hind of Ceryneia dedicated to Artemis. If viewed on a different plane, this fun is not Hercules’ fun, but fun made upon Hercules by the king, the power-holder, to show that he had power even to play upon the greatest bodily power of mankind. Again we see the legend is giving us frightening information about the cruel exercise of power of the powerful over the powerless.

The word OF is to be deleted.

We have so far analysed only five of the legends of Hercules' twelve labours. An analysis of all the legends will similarly show the same historical, ethical and social picture of the then Greek society. So we are not lengthening the discussion to the effect of boredom. We would like to wind it up now with some general comments on them. The other seven labours commonly involve encounters with wild beasts and fierce monsters. In a realistic perspective, it is unacceptable that such beasts or monsters ever existed in the world. In the historical interpretations of myth, in fact, such beasts and monsters are not usually taken for beasts or monsters. They are always taken as metaphorical magnifications of things of the real world. Then why, how and by whom the magnification was worked out are questions of great importance.

Based on the already analysed legends, it is valid to guess that it was the king and the people of power who magnified the beastliness and the monstrosity of things and persons that had to bear grudge and enmity of the king. Why they magnified the evil seems to have already been answered in our discussion where we have said why Geryon was a giant. Geryon was a giant because he had to incur the envy of Eurystheus for possessing the cattle. Geryon incurred the explicit envy of the king and that envy was a patriotic quality for the king. This is because Geryon was an outsider and the king's desire of snatching away the possessions of an outsider, a non-Greek, was regarded as act of welfare for the whole Greek nation. But if somebody from among the Greeks had to incur the envy of Eurystheus, the envy could not be made explicit in fear that the nation would not take it easy. In such cases it was necessary for the power-circle to establish that unfortunate fellow incurring the king's envy, wrath or hatred as a beast or a monster. Almost similarly, we know during the long period of catholic tyranny any person incurring the wrath of the pope or the bishop or the church was easily processed into a heretic or a witch and was burnt alive. Eurystheus and his power-sharers were just good enough not to burn the fellow alive as the Catholics did. Rather, he found it easy to dispose of the fellow with the mighty club of Hercules. He also gave this cruel act a wrapping of greatness by leaving it for the posterity as a heroic deed of Hercules, concealing deceptively all the misery and ugliness associated with it.

All these interpretations of the legends of Hercules that we have tried to present here are obviously rather narrow and partial. They invite one to view those legends only through a porthole which provides the view of the power and the power practices of the then Greek society. There is possibility of various other interpretations of these legends on various other perspectives. The medieval moralists interpreted these legends of labour in terms of pure asceticism. The stoic philosophers idealised them as examples of endurance and courage. In the 'Monk's Tale' Chaucer placed Hercules among great religious figures like Adam and Samson, and also among heroic historical figures like Alexander. The Burgundian royal house proudly traced their descent from Hercules's supposed marriage with the princess Alise. Hercules was later connected even to the Christian saints. The facades of the Colleoni chapel at Bergamo and the Campanile at

Florence both have reliefs of Hercules's labours as well as Old Testament scenes. This practice goes as back as to the fourth century paintings in some of the catacombs of Rome. As a religio-romantic interpretation of the Herculean legends, Nicola Pisano transformed a nude Hercules into an image of Christian fortitude on the pulpit of Pisa Cathedral (Radice 130).

These conventional considerations and interpretations mainly maintain the principles of art and literary criticism. Ours involves both the literary principles and the principles of history following the footsteps of historians like Korovkin or Kalim Khan. In the post colonial view point, such historio-literary interpretation of myths, I think, is more significant than a merely literary approach. We are not saying that ours is the first one in this regard. Rather, we say that more and more light need to be thrown to illuminate such historio-literary views about Roman and Greek myths.

All along the essay, we have used the word 'Greek' and 'Greek civilisation' to refer, in a historical sense, to the Ionian, Balkan and Aegean people and the land. But historically these were not called 'Greek' or 'Greek Civilisation' in the Achaean, Illyrian, Dorian or Hellenic age.

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