

Legends of Mussoorie

SARVAJIT MUKERJI

Professor

Department of English, University of Allahabad, Allahabad (U.P.) India

ABSTRACT

A legend is ‘a story rooted in fact but which has been elaborated over time so that it is largely fictional’, thus the binaries of fact and fiction merge in a legend. The origins of most legends are buried in the hoary past, but legendary heroes and their exploits continue to dominate the thinking of communities and nations even in the present. However, in Hugh and Colleen Gantzer’s *Mussoorie’s Mythistory*, it is not a person but a region, Mussoorie and its environs, which is the hero. The legends that have grown around this ‘hill station’ which is celebrating its bi-centenary in 2023 is at the core of this text. Because these myths which have grown around Mussoorie are relatively recent, originating mostly during the 19th and early 20th centuries, they provide an insight as to how myths originate and propagate. Interestingly, this new approach to myth, place-based rather than personality based, opens up a whole range of possibilities in the understanding of myths and legends. The proposed paper therefore seeks to read *Mussoorie’s Mythistory* in the light of the insights provided by Geocriticism which suggests that a literary work is a type of cartography which helps in visualising a location much better than a mere map.

Key Words : Myth, ‘ Mythistory’, Mussoorie, Geocriticism, Bioregion

A Mussoorie Legendarium:

Myths and legends are as old as civilisation. ‘A system of hereditary stories of ancient origin’, these stories tell us a lot about ourselves—what we make of the world, why we perform certain rituals, who we are? Myths and legends have not only influenced writers, poets and critics, they have fascinated anthropologists, psychologists and linguists as well motivating some to base their theories on myth. Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Levi Straus are good examples. This proves that myths are very much alive in our technology driven age and continue to influence both individuals and cultural groups. A distinction is sometimes made between myth and legend. If the hero or protagonist of a traditional story is a human being rather than a supernatural being, it is called a legend. My paper however discusses a new variation of the legend—stories, perhaps rooted in fact but certainly elaborated in the telling, where not an individual but a *region* is the protagonist. This location is Mussoorie which sits on a ridge of the outer Himalayas overlooking the Doon Valley,

which celebrated its 200th birthday in 2023. Central to this paper is the concern raised by the founder of Ecocriticism, Cheryl Glotfelty which insists that ‘place’ should be included as a significant category of literary analysis along with race, class and gender. Travel writers Colleen and Hugh Gantzer add the category of place to the understanding of myth in their book *Mussoorie’s Mythistory* in which they delve into the myths surrounding their hometown, Mussoorie. The term ‘Mythistory’, as they explain in the Preface is a neologism coined by them to highlight ‘that tenuous area which lies between myth and history’. At the heart of a myth lies a real event, they aver, and gradually stories are spun around these real events, much in the way an oyster secretes nacre which eventually creates a glowing pearl out of an irritant. Defining the term ‘legend’, Edward Quinn makes the same point. It is ‘a story rooted in fact but which has been elaborated over time so that it is largely fictional’. He cites the Arthurian legends as an example. The tropes of the ancient Arthurian legends are classical— a semi-

divine hero, battles against demonic forces, a strong moral framework, nation building and the like. Can a legendarium that is nature centric and has an emphasis on place be constructed?

In order to appreciate *Mussoorie's Mythistory* the reader needs to know something about Mussoorie, its past, its present, its location, and its myths. Mussoorie was 'discovered' by two English officials, Frederick Young and Fredrick J Shore in 1823. Frederick Young founded the Gurkha regiment, built the first house in Mussoorie, Mullingar, which still stands, and introduced potato cultivation to the Garhwal hills, a major crop in the Mussoorie and Jaunsar region till date. The twin station of Landour was established in 1829 as a military cantonment, growing around Depot Hill where a military convalescent centre and hospital had been set up. This division is still in place. The popularity of Mussoorie grew by leaps and bounds, and by 1901 it was a popular resort patronised both by the British and the Indian Royalty. In fact, the apartheid practiced by the British in the summer capitals of Shimla, Nainital or Darjeeling was absent in Mussoorie, as a result Indian Royal families built substantial palaces and residences here. This may have been the reason why several ruling families in exile like the Amirs of Afghanistan, the Nepali Royal family and Prince Dalip Singh of Punjab stayed for extended periods in Mussoorie building palaces of their own. Fairlawn, for example was built by an exiled king of Nepal and Bala Hisar housed Emir Dost Mohammad of Afghanistan. Interestingly, the aromatic Basmati of Dehradun was introduced into the region by the Afghan Royalty in exile. Mussoorie rapidly developed into a sought- after resort. Roads were laid, electricity was made available, and several high- end hotels were established here. In fact the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration stands on the site of the erstwhile Charleville Hotel. One of the reasons for this rapid development was the proximity of Mussoorie to both Delhi and Lucknow, and the relative ease with which it could be approached. Unlike Nainital or Shimla, Mussoorie is easily accessible— only 35 miles from the verdant Doon Valley which is cradled by the Himalaya and the Shivalik ranges.

Paradoxically, Mussoorie blossomed during the World War, earning for itself the sobriquet 'the Paris of the East'. As war raged in Europe, the upper- upper British officials and wealthy Indian Royalty found it impossible to visit Europe for extended holidays as they were wont

to do earlier, so they flocked to Mussoorie for the 'season'. Also, the military convalescent centre in Landour, as well as Dehradun were important centres of recuperation and rest for the Allied troops. In response to this influx, hotels and nightclubs proliferated and Mussoorie launched into the most hectic phase of its existence. Some of the tales in *Mussoorie's Mythistory* delve into this 'Paris of the East' period of Mussoorie's history. Between 1947 and 1970 Mussoorie went into a decline. The British had left. The Indian Royalty was coping with drastically changed circumstances and the convalescent centre in Landour had been closed down. Mussoorie's fortunes started looking up again when the Indian middle class rediscovered Mussoorie as a holiday destination and recrowned it as the 'Queen of Hill Stations'. It is Mussoorie — its location, its landscape, its seasons and its permanent residents — which is central to its myths. These myths are recent, no more than a century and a half old, but are interesting and unique. At the centre is not a human being or a divine entity but a town, and the land is as important as the human actors. Myths are timeless. Myths are anonymous. Even if we know the author, Valmiki or Homer for example, the tale lies in the past. The Gantzers have adhered to the mythic style by leaving the year of the events they describe largely vague. The narrator identifies closely with the reader/ listener by using the pronoun 'we' which includes both reader and narrator in the telling. It is not an individual but a community which is imbibing the tales of its past. The region itself is a complex function comprising its permanent residents— Indian, English and expatriates — and the landscape. The text proceeds along with seasonal cycle. There is a story linked to every season: winter, spring, summer and autumn and again winter. The season, whether icy winter or mellow autumn is lyrically evoked. The season dictates the content of the story. The first chapter is set in winter. 'That winter, the terror came' begins the legend of the Snow Beast.

Mussoorie had witnessed three consecutive winters of exceptional cold and it was winter again when the first reports of a massive, hairy biped of demon-like strength began trickling in. The first person to see this creature was a farmer in the little hamlet of Bhilaru, not too far from Mussoorie. Snow lay thick on the ground and icy winds were blowing from the frozen mountains of the greater Himalayas. The farmer had retired into his tiny hut with his family when he heard his cow bellowing in pain. He rushed out just in time to see a

huge hairy biped disappearing into the darkness. The roof of the cowshed had been wrenched back, the stout door broken and the cow severely mauled. After this, reports started coming in thick and fast. Cattle had been attacked each time and the villagers reported hearing a snuffling sound outside as the Snow Beast prowled around the snow bound villages in the darkness. The winter landscape and the freezing weather of the region are graphically evoked. The hamlets, settlements and the people which the Snow Beast attacked are clearly mentioned enhancing the sense of place... after Bhilaru, Frosty Hall, Bansigarh and then Lincoln's Piggery face the wrath of the Beast. The outlying cottages of Mussoorie, hidden in oak and maple woods, most vulnerable to the attack of the beast are described. Come evening everyone hurried indoors. Doors were shut and securely bolted and windows fastened as people listened in dread to the deathly silence outside. Could the Snow Beast be prowling around? The bewildered and terrified populace are at a loss. What is this beast and from where has it appeared? They are enlightened by the 'Nepali prince'. The Snow Beast, he says is a yeti, an Abominable Snowman which has wandered far from its domain. Such events are well known in his country, says the prince. 'The Snow Beast' is woven out of fact, fiction and location. That a branch of the Nepali Royal family lived in greater Mussoorie for many years is a fact. They built a palace, Fairlawn, near Jharipani, parts of which still exist. Whether the yeti or Abominable Snow Man is myth or reality is not known. Several mountaineers claim to have seen extraordinarily large footprints in the snow in and around Mt Everest, and some the yeti itself. 'The Snow Beast' has skilfully amalgamated these elements while also giving it a strong local flavour. It is about the environs of Mussoorie facing an unknown terror. The speakers and the listeners are not individualised, rather they are mostly anonymous, a community relating its experiences one winter, long ago.

There are many legends, both Eastern and Western about the capacity of some human beings to metamorphose into an animal—a wolf for example as in the Western legends of the werewolf or the ability of women to turn into snakes and *vice-versa*. The *ichchadhari nagin* has inspired many a Bollywood blockbuster. These legends from the Puranas are about women who possess the capacity to transform themselves into snakes through the blessings of lord Shiva. A Lamia, on the other hand is a Western myth about a demon that

is half woman and half serpent. The Lamia can metamorphose into a woman who eventually kills the man she copulates with. In *Mussoorie's Mythistory* 'The Lamia' is a legend set in wartime Mussoorie, a time when Mussoorie was a glittering resort, 'the Paris of the East' which attracted performers and dancers from war torn Europe for the delectation of Allied soldiers and holidaying Royals. The unlikely location of this myth is the Mall that 'eternal drawing room of Mussoorie' where it was all-important to be seen after 5 O' clock. The text evocatively describes the Mall and then sites the location of the nightclub called The Corniche, 'between Hackman's and the Savoy' owned by an Egyptian, Apollo Christophe. The reason for the great popularity of The Corniche was a cabaret advertised as 'Exotic Lilith and the Passion of the Lamia'. At the root of the shocking events at The Corniche *viz.*, the unexplained deaths of Christophe and the lead singer of the band, Vanita Possum by strangulation was a triangular passion involving Christophe, Vanita and the sinister Romanian dancer, Lilith. Vanita conspires to get Lilith's contract cancelled. Lilith's python is taken away by the RSPCA and locked in a shed. The same night both Christophe and Vanita are killed. Lilith and the snake both disappear without a trace. How did the snake open the hatch of the box where it was kept? Where did Lilith vanish? These questions lead to only one answer—Lilith was a Lamia.

Since these legends of Mussoorie are of relatively recent origin, no more than 200 or 150 years old, they give a glimpse into how legends are born. Usually something unusual or inexplicable lies at its core. Sometimes persons or communities which are different and exotic may be the focus of the legend. The story 'Horse Feathers' builds on these twin foundations. On the one hand, it is a recorded fact that several rulers in exile lived in Mussoorie or its outskirts in remote fortified structures, surrounded by their own subjects. These erstwhile Royals and their retinue were obviously different from the local populace, and their very foreign-ness gave rise to stories about them. On the other hand, the myth of the flying horse is a persistent one in both eastern and western mythologies. Pegasus in Greek mythology, Uchchaihshravas in Hindu and Al- Buraq in Islamic writing are but a few flying steeds mentioned in ancient texts. When a ruined wooden mansion on the Northern slopes of Mussoorie, Dev Darshan, is renovated and a notice saying that it was now the property of the Khan of Mongolistan is put up, the locals are mystified. Even

more mysterious is the Mongolistan crest—it shows a silver horse head with a tiny horn. The Khan and his retinue arrive dead at night under a heavy escort. Though the citizens of Mongolistan do not look exotic they keep aloof, and soon there are strange reports of enormous birds (or are they steeds?) seen in the night sky. They seem to be emanating from the property, Dev Darshan. Dr. Dastidar, a well known folklorist airs his views at a party. All the legends about flying horses are about single specimens—one of a kind. What if these individual flying horses were procured from somewhere they were bred? Only the Turkic people have a name for a breed flying horses—Tulpar. Could it be that they occasionally exported one of their flying horses? Certain it is that the horse still appears on the State emblem of Mongolia. The Khan and his retinue disappear as mysteriously as they arrived, but they leave behind the legend of the flying horses...and there is one horse feather to indicate that there was some truth in the tale.

Can legends be fashioned in an age of technology? Science has offered rational explanations for many natural phenomena. Technology and development have generated spaces which are monotonously similar—airports, malls and gated multi-storied apartments are mostly alike. Marc Auge in his book *Non-places* characterises airports, supermarkets and malls as ‘nonplaces’ as these are places not meant for settling in. But very often legends grow around some singular or unusual feature of local topography. Red soil may be attributed to the blood of a slain demon, or an unusual rock formation identified as the hearth of a legendary heroine. ‘Burnt Hill’ is a tale about a mysterious entity—‘Tara bhoot’, a location—Pari Tibba, and technology - a woofer used to amplify low intensity sounds. Going from Mussoorie to Barlowganj, the tourist can see an odd-shaped, black hump of a hill to the east. A large part of this hill is devoid of all vegetation even though the rest of the landscape is thickly wooded. Local residents, like Ruskin Bond have written about a mysterious green light seen criss-crossing this hill at night. No one has been able to explain the source or purpose of this zigzagging light. Pari Tibba also has some ruins of an earlier settlement which had to be abandoned due to the frequency of thunderbolt with which it was hit. Unsurprisingly, local lore has developed around this bare and mysterious hilltop. ‘Burnt Hill’ is more individualised than ‘The Snow Beast’. The community does appear as an anxious audience to the happenings on the hill, but the

events unfold through the actions of individuals. The tale begins with a striking phenomenon witnessed on Pari Tibba by a young Parsi boy from Barlowganj. Rustomjee Khusro Sharoorjee Dastoor, Sam Dustoor in short, the sixteen year old son of the municipal health assistant of Barlowganj sees ‘a translucent bubble shaped like a huge disk made of jelly, hovering over Burnt Hill’ at sunrise one morning. Intrigued, he questions the Nepali coal burners, the Dotiyals, about the phenomenon. The Dotiyals are terrified. The Tara bhoot had reappeared they say. It had appeared once many years ago, and an old resident of Barlowganj now ninety-one years old, recalls its earlier visitation. The old-timer, a retired soldier from the legendary regiment Skinner’s Horse recalls how Skinner had taken recourse to the military band to fight the Tara Bhoot. Ammunition, bullets and canon balls had had just no effect on its jelly-like surface.

The veteran soldier’s tremulous words alert Tim Writer, the Superintendent of the Doon. Civil and military resources are marshalled and directed against the ever expanding, shimmering jelly covering Burnt Hill. By now it has devoured subsoil fungi and nematodes rendering the upper part of the hill as barren as the terrain on the planet Mars. It has commenced ingesting the livestock of the locals if these animals happen to wander near it. The area is cordoned off and a new technology, a woofer with consoles is directed upon the ever expanding, all devouring gel. How can sustained music destroy an entity which has proven to be impervious to guns and gunpowder? The veteran has an answer. *Ojhas* in his family are in possession of a text, the *Bhoot Shastraw* here this evil spirit has been described. While this entity is generated from chaos, music is born of harmony. Only music can destroy it. Sure enough, as amplified drumbeats pulsate around Burnt Hill, the jelly-like substance cracks and fissures, and millions of glittering rotating crystals appear coruscating in the sunlight, and then imploding into a fine powder. The Tara Bhoot has been vanquished as evil inevitably is, in a legendarium. Thus does technology and ancient wisdom combine to destroy the Tara bhoot. What is interesting is Sam Dastoor’s efforts in later years to understand what happened that day? As a doctor he knows that carbon is the basis of all life on earth. He has studied that silica too can form long molecular chains like carbon. He also is aware that when viruses have no hosts to breed in, they sleep as crystals, and that crystals can be destroyed by sound, intense sound. The reader must join the dots to

understand what happened on that day so many years ago, how the menace was destroyed using inputs from modern technology and traditional wisdom.

The Winterline is a phenomenon unique to Mussoorie. It refers to a false horizon that is visible only in Mussoorie and in some places in the Alps. The setting sun does not vanish behind a hill, rather it disappears in the western sky in a riot of fiery colours, but the sun itself is not visible. The phenomena is unique and therefore a fit subject for a legend to be born. 'Winterline' is the last tale in *Mussoorie's Mythistory*. The cyclic time frame of the text becomes evident now as the wheel comes full circle. It is winter again, and the biting cold season evocatively described. But, if 'The Snow Beast' was about hearsay and terror, 'Winterline' is about a quasi-scientific explanation about the uniqueness of Mussoorie. Mussoorie is karst country. Beneath the town lies a labyrinth of limestone caves and subterranean streams. The oak trees, the Garhwali *banj*, acts as a conductor of moisture and electricity recharging the battery-like structure under this mountain range. The

winterline is the aura generated by this electricity. This 'scientific' explanation of a mystifying natural phenomenon closes this text. Most legends convey some idea of the technology of the age in which it was written, but the legends of Mussoorie are the products of an age of science. The bombs and bombers of the World Wars are proof enough of the violence of man-made technology. But Nature has its technology too and the we are often unaware of it all as it is silent and hidden. But the vibrant scarlet, pink and gold of the winterline sky is a subtle indicator of Nature's technology. We can only understand it through observation, intuition and understanding.

REFERENCES

- Gantzer, Hugh and Gantzer, Colleen (2018). *Mussoorie's Mythistory*. New Delhi. Niyogi Books.
- Quinn, Edward (1999). *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms*. New York. Checkmark Books.
