



Transformation, Desire, and Cultural Order: A Comparative Reading of Ulupi and Lamia Through Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, and Lacan

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of the myth of Ulupi in the Mahabharata and the Greek myth of Lamia, examining how transformation, desire, and revenge operate differently across two distinct cultural traditions. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Jacques Lacan, the study explores how myths function simultaneously as ideological systems, structural narratives, and expressions of unconscious desire. While both figures undergo transformation as a response to desire and loss, the paper argues that the meaning of transformation is culturally determined rather than universal – in the Greek tradition, it becomes a mechanism of punishment and fragmentation, whereas in the Indian epic tradition, it enables negotiation and social integration. By reading these myths through a combined structuralist and psychoanalytic lens, the paper demonstrates that myth does not merely reflect cultural anxieties but actively constructs the boundaries within which desire, identity, and social order are understood.

Keywords: Ulupi, Lamia, transformation, comparative mythology, Lacanian psychoanalysis, structuralism, desire, female agency, the Real, the Symbolic.

Introduction

Myth occupies a central position in human civilization, functioning not merely as narrative but as a system of meaning through which societies interpret reality. As Roland Barthes (1972) argues, myth operates as a second-order language that transforms historically contingent meanings into

naturalized ideology, making cultural constructions appear as natural facts. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1978) extends this understanding by proposing that myths are organized around deep structural oppositions – such as nature and culture, human and animal – that govern collective patterns of thought. Jacques Lacan (2007) further contributes a psychoanalytic

dimension, offering the concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real as tools for understanding how identity and desire are structured through narrative.

The myth of Lamia, rooted in Greek mythology, presents a figure who embodies both beauty and monstrosity. Once a queen of Libya loved by Zeus, Lamia is devastated when Hera, consumed by jealousy, kills her children. This catastrophic loss triggers not only physical transformation into a serpent-like creature but also a total psychological fragmentation – she loses her identity, her social place, and her capacity to grieve normally. Her dual nature – seductive yet destructive – reflects deep-seated cultural anxieties surrounding female desire and power. Her compulsive consumption of children is not simple revenge; it is, in Lacanian terms, the repetition of an unprocessable trauma, a loss so overwhelming it cannot be mourned or symbolized. Beauty becomes a mask for underlying violence, and the myth encodes this transformation as the natural – though culturally constructed – consequence of transgressive female desire.

The myth of Ulupi in the Mahabharata presents a parallel yet culturally distinct narrative. As a Naga princess, Ulupi encounters Arjuna with an awareness of the hostility between her serpent race and the hero. Yet this tension is transformed into desire upon their meeting – a shift that sets her story on a fundamentally different path from Lamia's. Ulupi's ability to assume human form signifies a voluntary transition between worlds – human and non-human, desire and duty. Unlike Lamia, whose transformation is imposed as divine punishment, Ulupi's transformation is self-initiated and relational. Her story does not end in exile or monstrosity; she remains integrated within the world of the epic, and later performs the remarkable act of restoring Arjuna to life. From a psychoanalytic perspective, her shift illustrates the fluidity of desire within the Symbolic order – her transformation becomes a

symbolic negotiation between instinct and social law.

Within this framework, the present paper places these two myths in dialogue. While both originate from distinct cultural traditions and center on female figures who undergo transformation in response to desire and loss, the paper argues that while transformation functions as a shared symbolic mechanism in both myths, its meaning is culturally determined rather than universal – operating as punishment and fragmentation in the Greek tradition, and as negotiation and integration in the Indian epic tradition. Reading these myths comparatively reveals not only their structural similarities but also the profoundly different ways in which each culture imagines the relationship between female desire, identity, and social order.

Literature Review

Myth has been studied across disciplines including anthropology, literary studies, psychoanalysis, structuralism, religious studies, and feminist theory. Each field approaches myth differently: anthropology views it as a cultural system, literary studies as narrative discourse, psychoanalysis as an expression of unconscious desire, and structuralism as a system of binary oppositions. Key theorists whose work shapes this field include Claude Lévi-Strauss (1978), who mapped the structural logic of myth; Roland Barthes (1972), who exposed its ideological function; Sigmund Freud, who linked myth to repressed unconscious desire; and Jacques Lacan (2007), who reframed the unconscious as structured like a language. Across these approaches, scholars have consistently focused on themes such as transformation, desire, identity, gender, power, and the mediation of binary oppositions. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that myth is not merely storytelling but a complex system through which cultures negotiate meaning, identity, and social order.

Scholarship has largely interpreted Lamia as a figure of punishment, monstrosity, and transgressive femininity. While early mythographic accounts present her transformation as divine retribution, feminist and psychoanalytic readings have reinterpreted her as a cultural projection of anxiety surrounding female desire, motherhood, and loss. More recent approaches emphasize her position as a liminal figure whose transformation reflects both structural instability and psychological trauma – aligning closely with Lacanian understandings of identity collapse and the intrusion of the Real.

In contrast, Ulupi has received comparatively limited critical attention. She is typically discussed within the narrative and ethical framework of the Mahabharata, with existing interpretations emphasizing her role in facilitating relational harmony and restoring cosmic balance rather than analyzing her transformation or subjectivity. This relative neglect reflects both her non-monstrous characterization and a broader tendency within mythological and psychoanalytic scholarship to prioritize Western traditions and more visibly transgressive female figures. As a result, the potential for a comparative analysis bringing Ulupi and Lamia into dialogue – particularly through a Lacanian framework – remains largely unexplored.

Despite the extensive scholarship on myth, transformation, and psychoanalysis, three significant gaps remain in the existing literature. First, while Lamia has been widely studied within Greek mythology and Ulupi appears in discussions of the Mahabharata, no sustained comparative analysis has brought these two figures into the same analytical framework. Second, the application of Lacanian theory – specifically the triadic model of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real – has rarely been extended into cross-cultural mythological comparison, particularly between Western and South Asian traditions. Third, and most fundamentally, transformation in myth

has typically been treated as a fixed symbolic motif carrying universal meaning, rather than as a culturally mediated mechanism whose significance varies across mythological systems. The present study addresses all three gaps by reading Ulupi and Lamia together through a combined structuralist and Lacanian framework, demonstrating that transformation is not a universal symbol but a culturally constructed response to desire, loss, and social order.

Theoretical Framework

Lacan: The Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real

Lacan's three orders – the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real – are not sequential stages of development but overlapping registers of experience that structure subjectivity simultaneously and continuously.

The Imaginary is the register of self-image and identification. It is the picture we construct of ourselves – a sense of being coherent, stable, and complete. This image is not entirely false, but it is not fully grounded either; it is a constructed wholeness, a necessary fiction through which the ego organizes itself. As Lacan (2007) argues, this sense of unity originates in the mirror stage, where the subject first identifies with an external image of itself.

The Symbolic is the register of language, law, and social structure. It is the system we are born into – family, culture, social norms – through which we learn who we are supposed to be and how we are expected to act. Crucially, desire itself is shaped within the Symbolic. We do not want things naturally or spontaneously; what we desire is structured by what language makes available and what society permits or values. The Symbolic gives form and direction to desire, making it expressible and socially recognizable.

The Real is the most difficult register to articulate – appropriately, since it refers precisely to that which resists articulation. It

appears in moments of shock, trauma, or overwhelming loss, when language fails and the ordinary sense of self begins to break down. The Real is not everyday reality; it is what exceeds and disrupts our ability to make sense of reality. When the Real erupts, it does not enrich the Symbolic order – it tears it.

Applied to mythological analysis, this framework produces a clear and productive distinction. A character who can express desire through language, negotiate within social relationships, and remain integrated within a community is functioning within the Symbolic order. A character who experiences something so catastrophic that it cannot be processed, narrated, or mourned may collapse into the Real – losing the structures of identity and desire that the Symbolic provides. As this paper will demonstrate, this distinction maps precisely onto the contrast between Ulupi and Lamia.

Barthes: Myth as Naturalized Ideology

Roland Barthes (1972) argues that myth operates by transforming cultural constructions into apparent natural facts. Many of the idea's societies live by – concerning gender, morality, and appropriate behavior – are not natural but historically and culturally produced. Myth, however, presents these ideas as timeless and self-evident, concealing their origins and removing their history. When a myth shows that a woman who crosses certain boundaries is inevitably punished, it encourages the reader to accept this outcome as simply how things are, rather than as a cultural judgment that could be otherwise. This is precisely what Barthes means by second-order signification – myth takes a cultural construction and presents it as natural truth, making ideology invisible.

Lévi-Strauss: Binary Oppositions and Structural Transformation

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1978) approaches myth differently, focusing not on ideology but on structure. For Lévi-Strauss, myths are built upon fundamental binary oppositions – human and animal, nature and culture, order

and chaos – that reflect how human thought organizes the world. These oppositions are not resolved neatly; rather, myths bring them into contact, explore the tension between them, and sometimes reveal how unstable the boundary between them actually is. Transformation is particularly significant within this framework. When a figure moves from human to animal, or crosses between worlds, the myth is not merely narrating an event – it is thinking through the problem of what separates those categories in the first place. Myth, for Lévi-Strauss, is less about what happens and more about the structure of meaning that makes certain things happen in certain ways.

Lamia: The Real Breaks Through

Lacan's concept of the Real refers not simply to painful experience but to those moments so overwhelming that they cannot be processed, narrated, or made meaningful through language. When Lamia loses her children to Hera's violence, this is precisely the kind of event Lacan describes – not merely a tragedy but a rupture that completely destroys her world. There is no social form available to her through which this loss can be grieved, explained, or integrated. It simply should not have happened, and yet it did – and that impossibility is exactly what makes it Real.

Because the loss cannot be symbolized, Lamia cannot move through it. Instead she becomes trapped within it. Her subsequent actions – the compulsive killing of children – do not constitute purposive revenge in any meaningful sense. They are repetition: the same devastating loss replaying itself endlessly because it has never been completed, never been mourned, never been given a name or a story. As Lacan (2007) argues, what cannot be symbolized returns – not as memory but as compulsive re-enactment.

Her physical transformation into a monstrous, hybrid figure reflects this psychological collapse. She no longer occupies any stable identity – she is neither mother nor

woman nor monster in any coherent sense. Her Imaginary self, the unified image of the beautiful Libyan queen, has shattered. Without the Symbolic to reconstruct it, she exists in a state of permanent fragmentation – expelled from the human world because she can no longer be contained within its structures of meaning.

Lévi-Strauss's framework illuminates the structural dimension of this collapse. Lamia's transformation into a hybrid figure enacts the breakdown of the binary opposition between human and animal that structures the social order. She does not cross this boundary in a controlled or purposive way; she falls through it. The result is permanent liminality – she belongs to neither category and cannot be reintegrated into the human world. Barthes would add that this expulsion is presented not as a cultural judgment but as a natural inevitability. What the myth actually encodes, however, is a cultural anxiety: that motherhood – the foundational social role assigned to women – can be inverted, and that the nurturer can become the destroyer. The myth manages this anxiety by attributing the inversion to transgression, thus making ideology appear as nature.

Ulupi: Desire Within the Symbolic

Ulupi's story presents desire in a fundamentally different register from Lamia's – not as overwhelming rupture but as purposive, expressible, and socially negotiable. When she encounters Arjuna, she does not act impulsively or destructively. She speaks. She explains who she is, articulates what she wants, and brings her desire into a structured interaction with another person. This act of speaking is not a minor narrative detail; in Lacanian terms, it is the defining operation of the Symbolic order. To name desire, direct it toward another, and place it within a social exchange is to keep it within the register of language and meaning – preventing it from

collapsing into the “(Kristeva, 1982). Without the Symbolic Real.

Arjuna's response confirms this Symbolic framing. He does not simply comply or refuse; he engages, considers his obligations, and responds within a structure of duties and relationships. What unfolds between them is therefore not raw desire but desire shaped by language, roles, and social law – exactly what Lacan means by desire mediated through the Symbolic order. Ulupi does not lose herself in this process. She remains coherent, connected, and part of the larger world of the epic.

From a structuralist perspective, Ulupi's movement between the human world and the Naga realm is a crossing of the binary opposition between culture and nature, human and non-human. But this crossing is purposive and controlled. Ulupi does not dissolve the boundary; she traverses it with intention, like a figure who knows exactly where the threshold is and how to step across it and back. Her transformation into human form is not a loss of identity but an extension of it – a capacity she exercises with clear purpose.

This integration is confirmed by her later role in the narrative, when she restores Arjuna to life after he is killed by his own son. This act demonstrates that her desire, rather than producing destruction, generated lasting relational loyalty and social agency. Where Lamia's desire became a compulsive repetition circling an absence, Ulupi's desire led to connection, narrative, and ultimately restoration. Her story shows that desire can exist within limits – that it can be expressed, understood, worked through, and made socially productive rather than destructive.

Comparative Analysis: Two Cultural Logics of Transformation

The most fundamental difference between Lamia and Ulupi is not what they do but what happens to them afterward. Lamia loses her place in the world entirely – her identity fragments, her connections dissolve,

and no space remains for her within the social order she once belonged to. Ulupi, by contrast, desires, acts, and crosses boundaries, yet remains connected to the world around her. She is not expelled or made monstrous. She

continues to have a role, a relationship, and ultimately an act of restoration to perform. Table 1 summarizes the key structural dimensions of this divergence.

Table 1: *Structural Comparison of Transformation in the Myths of Lamia and Ulupi*

Dimension	Lamia (Greek)	Ulupi (Indian)
Precipitating Event	Divine punishment; Hera kills her children	Personal desire; self-initiated encounter with Arjuna
Type of Transformation	Involuntary, punitive, externally imposed	Voluntary, purposeful, internally motivated
Lacanian Register	Collapse into the Real; identity fragments	Within the Symbolic; desire mediated through language and relation
Nature of Desire	Repetitive, destructive, anchored in irreversible loss	Relational, negotiated, capable of integration
Social Outcome	Exclusion, monstrosity, permanent liminality	Integration, continued agency, restoration
Cultural Logic	Things can break beyond repair	Things can bend without completely breaking

In Lacanian terms, this contrast maps precisely onto the difference between the Real and the Symbolic. Lamia falls into the Real – a space of unprocessable trauma where identity collapses and desire become destructive repetition. Ulupi operates within the Symbolic – a space where desire can be expressed through language, shaped by social relations, and integrated into a meaningful order. One figure is cut off; the other stays connected.

From a Barthesian perspective, both myths naturalize their respective cultural positions, presenting them as inevitable outcomes rather than constructed judgments. Lamia's myth naturalizes the idea that transgressive female desire produces chaos and destruction – making it appear as a law of nature. Ulupi's myth naturalizes the idea that female desire, when expressed within a relational and negotiated framework, is not

inherently threatening to social order. Neither myth is ideologically neutral; both are doing cultural work, but the cultural work they do points in fundamentally different directions.

What this reveals about the two cultural traditions is significant. However, this analysis does not claim to represent entire traditions but focuses on these figures as illustrative cases. The Greek myth encodes a world where transgression – particularly female desire that exceeds sanctioned limits – leads to irreversible collapse. The Indian epic tradition encodes something more flexible: even when boundaries are crossed, there remains a way to negotiate, integrate, and continue. In the simplest terms: Lamia's story shows a world where things can break beyond repair. Ulupi's story shows a world where things can bend without completely breaking. This difference is not accidental – it is the mythological expression of

two fundamentally different cultural logics of desire, identity, and social order.

Conclusion

Placing Lamia and Ulupi in comparative dialogue reveals a deceptively simple but important truth: similar stories do not always mean the same thing. Both figures undergo transformation, both experience desire, and both cross social boundaries – yet what happens to each is completely different. Lamia's story ends in irreversible collapse, her identity fragmented and her place in the world permanently lost. Ulupi's story ends in continuation, connection, and restoration. The comparison demonstrates that transformation in myth is not a fixed or universal symbol but a culturally variable mechanism whose meaning is determined by the ideological and structural system in which it operates.

This matters because it challenges us to stop reading myths through a single interpretive lens. Myths are not universal templates; they are cultural constructions that encode specific ways of understanding desire, identity, and social order. What one tradition presents as inevitable destruction, another presents as negotiable integration. By reading these two figures together through the frameworks of Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, and Lacan, this paper has shown that psychoanalytic and structuralist theory can be productively extended beyond its traditional Western focus – but that doing so requires sensitivity to cultural difference rather than the assumption of universal patterns.

Future research might extend this comparative approach in several directions. A broader study comparing additional transformation figures across mythological traditions would test whether the patterns identified here recur consistently. Analysis of contemporary retellings – in film, fiction, or digital media – would reveal whether these cultural logics of transformation persist into modern contexts. Scholars might also direct more sustained attention to figures like Ulupi,

whose relative marginality within existing scholarship conceals considerable analytical richness. More broadly, this comparative methodology need not remain confined to myth – it could be applied across literary and cultural traditions wherever questions of desire, identity, and social order intersect.

In the end, what this paper argues is both specific and general. Specifically: Lamia and Ulupi are not simply two versions of the same story. Generally: the culture that tells a myth about a woman who transforms is telling us, at the same time, exactly how it imagines the relationship between desire, identity, and the limits of the human world.

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