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ARCHETYPAL CRITICISM: A STUDY OF NORTHROP FRYE AND MAUD BODKIN

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ABSTRACT

Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* published in 1890, bringing to the fore the myths, beliefs, and practices of cultures and peoples across the world, forms the basis of many modern critical theories. C G Jung, some two decades later, would form the foundation of psychoanalysis, developed later by Freud, almost on the same dictum that human psychology functions as the collective consciousness, which in turn is the by-product of our cultural-mythological inheritance. Collective unconscious of Jung prompted Maud Bodkin to identify the enduring archetypes in poetry and drama from Sophocles to T S Eliot in her pioneering book *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934). She carries on with the idea of archetypes as studied by Carl Jung. She identified that the 'special emotional significance' that Jung attributes to poems are the results of the unconscious forces, which Jung terms 'primordial images', or archetypes. Bodkin could foresee Frye when the later said that the poetic expression, which is propelled by the residuous ensemble of the cultural codes in the unconscious, when brought into the functional light of the conscious empirical mind, become potent symbols to stir the psychology and yield thereupon a very convincing socio-cultural meaning. The western logocentrism is developed after the Great Code i.e Bible. Frye in his landmark book *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) sees the Bible as a composite whole of romance, tragedy, comedy, panegyric etc that effects the imagination of European scholarship. What the Bible, thus, places before a creative mind is its immense mythical structure which constitutes a mythological universe that has a beginning and end, and eternal life thereafter redeeming time from its existential limits. The present paper will highlight the understanding and application of the theory of archetypes as studied by Northrop Frye and Maud Bodkin.

Keywords: Mimesis, psychoanalysis, Archetype, Unconscious, Myth, Concern

Discussion

That human behaviour is conditioned by our religio-cultural symbols and mythic patterns brought into the focus a very competitive theoretical criticism, popularly known as Archetypal Criticism. It caught the imagination of literary analysis after Maud Bodkin's pioneering book *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934). Some

two decades later Northrop Frye with his *Anatomy of Criticism*, published in 1957, established the archetypal criticism at a very ambitious scale bringing a very credible cohesion between the cultural, religious, and civilisational body of myths and symbols and the whole order of literary works from the Bible to the present. Frye however matured the literary criticism from a mere psychological angle of Jung, by highlighting the recurrence of universally familiar characters, landscapes, and narrative structures within genre and text.

Northrop Frye attempts a credibly universal system of myths and archetypes. Though he didn't mention Jung or Bodkin but that looks to be a very clever intellectualisation of patenting a formalisation of literary narrative and to constructing a form of literary history from the Biblical, apocryphal, Greco-Roman and oriental sources. However, he kept it largely western logo-centric. Standing very close to James G Frazer and Maud Bodkin, Frye elaborates the recurrent archetype of birth-death-and rebirth. He elaborates it at four levels starting from mythical mode, high-mimetic mode to low-mimetic and ironic mode thus constructing the whole system of archetypal recurrence. He writes, "Criticism seems to be badly in need of a coordinating principle, a central hypothesis which, like the theory of evolution in biology, will see the phenomena it deals with as parts of a whole" (Frye, 1957: 16).

Frye builds his archetypal framework on two basic categories- comedic and tragic. He further divides them into: comedy and romance for the comedic; tragedy and satire (or ironic) for the tragic. Frye did not acknowledge Frazer squarely for his division and categories but he borrows heavily from him so far as the nature and cycle of seasons is concerned. Each season is aligned with a literary genre: comedy with spring, romance with summer, tragedy with autumn, and satire with winter.

Summer –Comedy (The birth of the hero)

Autumn –Tragedy (Movement towards the death or defeat of the hero)

Winter – Irony or Satire (The hero is absent)

Spring – Romance (The rebirth of the hero)

Frye, thus, sets the Bible in the centre of western logocentrism categorising literature in modes, symbols, myths and genres - high-mimetic and mythical at the top and ironic at the bottom. In the divine world the central process or movement is that of the death and rebirth, or the disappearance and return, or the incarnation and return, or the incarnation and withdrawal, of god. The god may be a sun-god, dying at night and re-born at dawn or else with an annual rebirth at the winter solstice; or he may be a god of vegetation, dying in autumn and reviving in spring, or (as in the birth stories of the Buddha) he may be an incarnate of god going through a series of human or animal life-cycles. As a god is almost by definition-immortal, it is a regular feature of all such myths that the dying god is reborn as the same person. Hence the mythical or abstract structural principle of the cycle is that the continuum of identity in the individual life from birth to death is extended from death to rebirth. To this pattern of identical recurrence, the death and revival of the same individual, all other cyclical patterns are as a rule assimilated. (Frye,1957: 158-159). Frye develops a structural pattern from modes, myths and incorporates natural cycles of seasons alongside the characters from mythical to ironic - thus characters from Jesus Christ of the Bible to Fanny of Hardy. Frye works on the patterns of plausibility at all levels. Frye establishes a chain of archetypes and occurrences.

This can be seen in killing the old king only to be replaced by a more youthful and young king. The Old Testament God's persistent demand of the sacrifices and the New Testament God's (Jesus Christ) sacrifice of himself to redeem humanity forever is the basis of these principles. The death and rebirth principles Frye elaborates in terms of the tragic and comic modes involving Dionysian and Apollonian in their center respectively. Both combined together constitute the Romantic Imagination, pervasive throughout the Romantic poetry. The both bring out as M.H.Abrams points out, the Dionysian figure of revolutionary destruction and the Apollonian figure of the promise of a bright new order".

The Bible creates space for the artist in terms of heaven and hell; and the Bible provides the European poets the fundamental archetypes, symbols and images which are being incorporated in literature down to the present day. Art itself is a liberating instrument in the anarchy of desires engrossed in material pursuits; art releases one towards the spiritual pleasures which is nowhere better than the myths. Frye writes: "Man lives in

two worlds, the world of nature which forms his external environment and the constructed world of civilization and culture he has made himself because he wants to live in such a world. The mythological universe is a model of the latter world ... It is a world built in the image of human desires and anxieties and preconceptions and ideals and objects of abhorrence, and it is always, and necessarily, geocentric and anthropocentric, which the actual environment is not. (Frye, 1976: 109)

Both Frye and Bodkin maintain that poetry speaks the language of Myth, not the language of reason or fact. Poetry never asserts anything as truth but tends to discover truth by highlighting what and how the religion, the culture has tried to find it out. Poetry represents 'something primitive in Society' (Frye, 1971: 84). Literature expresses the 'Myth of Concern' as opposed to 'Myth of Freedom' which is most expressed by the experimental and discursive writings such as science, history and philosophy. Frye says that for the Western world the myth of concern is the 'Judaean-Christian Myth' (Frye, 1971:37). Myth of concern is attached to the conventional social norms such as 'ritual, coronations, weddings, funerals, parades, demonstrations etc. that expresses an inner social identity', whereas the myth of freedom involves the 'liberal' elements of society 'the socially critical attitudes which perceive hypocrisy, corruption, failure to meet standards, gaps between real and ideal'. These are anti-ritualistic and demand reason and evidence. ((Frye, 1971:45)

The logic behind the 'myth of concern' and 'myth of freedom' is the design of the world itself which can be seen, by Man, from two dimensions- the world of nature and the world of art. We actually live in the objective world, the external environment, amidst all non-human forces such as sea, forests animals and other objects of nature, and then there is the world we aspire to live, in a world of human civilization built out the external environment. The later world is rooted in the conception of art, as the environment is rooted in the conception of nature. The objective world is described by man in a logical language of fact, reason, description and verification; while for the potentially created world he 'develops a Mythical language of hope, desire belief anxiety, polemic, fantasy and construction' ((Frye, 1971: 57). Frye further elaborates this in his *The Great Code* "The emphasis on narrative, and the fact that the entire Bible is enclosed in a narrative framework, distinguishes the Bible from a good many other sacred books ... The narrative framework of the Bible is a part of its emphasis upon the shape of history and the specific collision with temporal movement that its revelation is assumed to make." ((Frye, 1982:198). Even if we concentrate to evaluate the New Testament (Old Testament itself has many Judaic prophets and kings whose life story is that of an epic and tragedy), the whole life story of Jesus Christ is that of birth-rise-fall-and rebirth of a tragic romance hero. He is a blessed child, becomes a hero of the faithful, courts villainy of the hostile forces, crucified and finally has redemption for himself and the whole mankind.

When we come to Maud Bodkin we find that she puts into the literary theoretical discourse a language of archetypal analysis purely from literary sources and not from the anthropological and psychological narratives alone as put into discourse by Frazer and Jung. She underlines in *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*: "An attempt is here made to bring psychological analysis and reflection to bear upon the imaginative experience communicated by great poetry, and to examine those forms or patterns in which the universal forces of our nature there find objectification" (Bodkin, 1934: vii).

She brought out a convincing pattern of archetypes and symbols that were emotionally more connecting than the archetypal references of anthropology and psychology. Undoubtedly rituals and practices are the residual social exhibitions of what humans think but at the time of creative expressions they transform the rituals and practices at the level of a verbal connection. Since poetry is very close to the language of imaginative expressions of humans, archetypes converted into verbal symbols and patterns have a recurring connection from our cultural-socio-religio-economic past to the present. Bodkins says, "Through such recall one feels the kind of life one shares with plants and animals and the earth itself, present as a factor in the imaginative experience, together with the life shared with the poet as master of words and thought" (Bodkin, 1934: 22).

The connecting principle of mind that travels back in memory lane to discover its fascinating roots stumbles at every landmark of myths and legend and thus starts believing in the mythologization of present with the past with pride. She writes, "In poetry, we may identify themes having a particular form or pattern which

persists amid variation from age to age, and which corresponds to a pattern or configuration of emotional tendencies in the minds of those who are stirred by the theme" (Bodkin, 1934:18).

At this point, Frazer, Jung, Bodkin and Frye constitute the same system of recurring pattern that is known as archetype from past to the present. Every ritual of the present is a 'displacement' of once a mythic placement. Jung called this correspondence as a 'synchronicity' between the subjective and the objective world, a phenomenon that demonstrated the reality of an exchange between the psyche and a larger system of meaning. This trajectory of correspondence is conducted in symbols and these symbols develop the rhetorical expression of language. For her Shakespeare's tragedies conveyed an "emotional meaning that belonged to ancient rituals undertaken for the renewal of the life of the tribe" (Bodkin, 1934: 35).

However, Bodkin is more emphatic like Phillip Sydney to promote poetry as the most natural expression of a community's imaginative consciousness that connects mythic (ancient) to the modern (contemporary). Bodkin says that the symbolic character of a hero's journey is a testimonial of his ability to rise in ecstasy that buries him deep into "untried resources of character" (Bodkin, 1934: 26). She is referring to the making of a hero who is so touched by the objective occurrences that compels him to undergo a heroic quest when he imagines and expresses that puts him above ordinary mankind. Hamlet, Macbeth, Oedipus, Odysseus, Aeneid all had a quest and an expression that brought the heroic place to the level of a mythical god/hero. Maud Bodkin comments on *The Waste Land*: "The aspect of the poem which I wish to consider here is its character as exemplifying the pattern I have termed Rebirth. Notably the Poem accomplishes – in Jung's phrase – 'a translation of the primordial image into the language of the present', through its gathering into simultaneity of impression images from the remote past with incidents and phrases of the everyday present" (Bodkin, 1934: 308).

Conclusion

Thus, for Northrop Frye and Bodkin the deeper level of meaning established by symbols and archetypes are conditioned by the character's past and the past of the society that he/she represents. Thus she almost comes squarely to the same conclusion as that of Frye who finds the Bible as the root of the emanation of literary archetypes and symbols. The holy cross, the most often used symbol, is the biggest connection from past to the present. Altogether archetypal criticism largely is part of the structuralist school, which has, after the post-structuralist school of thought, been relegated, but, its relevance as an artistic socio-cultural form of interpretation connecting past to the present is never going to diminish.

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