Research Reinforcement | A Peer Reviewed International Refereed Journal | ISSN 2348-3857
Vol. 11, Issue 2 | November 2023 - April 2024 | pp. 41-45

(Re)visiting Myth and Archetypal Criticism: An Overview

Dr. Pooja Joshi

Assistant Professor, Department of English
University of Rajasthan, Jaipur (Rajasthan)

Abstract

In the twentieth century there was a revival of interest in myth, and a variety of perspectives on myth, archetype, metaphor, symbol, narrative, literature, and criticism emerged as a reaction to New Criticism. The most influential theorist of the 1930s and 40s Northrop Frye's myth criticism extended criticism beyond the boundaries of the single literary text to the total universe of literature itself and assimilated life into literature. His theory of myths emphasized the historical dimension of a work of art providing a transition from New Criticism to Structuralist and Poststructuralist criticism through 'archetypal criticism'. The 21st century is witnessing an upsurge of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary dimensions in the field of critical theories as well as social, cultural, and literary studies. In this context, the Frygian concept of mythology is not only relevant and meaningful but also paves the way for a better understanding of the human vision encompassed by the literary universe. How does Frye's mythopoeic perspective define the structural principle of a narrative that still practically works? Whether his argument that literary history is a gradual displacement of myth towards realism still manifests itself in literary works? These are the major questions the present paper seeks to probe into.

Keywords: *Myth, Archetypal Criticism, Interdisciplinary, Mythology, Displacement*

Introduction

Archetypal theory and criticism are often taken as a synonym of myth theory and criticism, though both types follow a distinct history and process. The term "archetype" can be traced to Plato's Greek *archetypos* (*arche*, 'original', *typos*, 'form') meaning "beginning pattern" but the concept came into the limelight in twentieth-century literary criticism (Rupprecht 1). In general, an *archetype* is any typical image, character, narrative design, theme, or some other literary phenomenon that is present in all literature and provides a basis for the study of its interconnectedness. Archetypal criticism has its roots in the works of the Swiss psychologist C. G. Jung (1875-1961) who propounded the theory of the "collective unconscious" (*The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*). In his article "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetic Art" (From *Contribution to Analytical Psychology*), Jung set forth a hypothesis about the psychological significance of poetry. The special emotional significance possessed by certain poems is attributed to the stirring in the reader's mind, within or beneath his conscious response, of unconscious forces which Jung terms 'primordial images'. He is the first to apply the term 'archetype' to these 'primordial images' describing them as "psychic residua of numberless experiences of the same type" in the lives of our very ancient ancestors; which are inherited in the "collective unconscious" of the human race and are expressed in myths, religion, dreams, and

private fantasies, as well as in the works of literature (quoted in Abrams 10, 12). Jung regarded 'archetypes' to be patterns of "instinctual behaviour" and essentially a "mythological figure" that repeats itself whenever creative fantasy is freely manifested. Archetypes are general and universal, primordial and recurrent.

Next to Jung, Archetypal criticism rests heavily on the works of anthropologists and comparative mythologists. Sir James Fraser's *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915) in twelve volumes is not the first attempt to document facts about primitive cultures, but the first to synthesize the material into one comprehensive vision of primitive life. Frazer thus unveiled the archetypal pattern of primitive thought and his work is a rich source for archetypes in their purest form. Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) is another work in the field of anthropology. She relies mostly on Frazer, and her book connects the grail legend to nature cults, tracing the evolution of the grail quest from its ritual origins to its manifestations in literary romance. The return of the grail, like the securing of the golden bough, means fertility and prosperity for the community.

Archetypal criticism is thus deeply indebted to the thought of Jung and Frazer, who can be taken as the twin fountainheads of the movement. Frazer's impact is felt in Miss Weston's work and Jungian influence is perceptible in Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934). Her work is the first systematic application of Jung's ideas to literature for the exploration of the hypothesis of the "collective unconscious." In her words: "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". (Preface v) In contrast to the methods of both Bodkin and Weston, comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell has combined both psychology and anthropology in his study of archetypes. In *The Power of Myth* (1991), Campbell explores the nature of mythology by using a more comprehensive definition of myth. For him, the true meaning of myth is not literal or historical, it is metaphysical and psychological. Campbell sees an underlying unity in all mythologies; there is essentially one story of the hero (the monomyth) and one story of transcendence– a picture with a thousand variations but still essentially the same.

While all these critics were attentive to the genesis of "archetypes," the Canadian critic Northrop Frye (1912-91) focussed on their analysis. In his major work *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Frye devised an elaborate taxonomy of modes, symbols, myths, and genres establishing a complex and comprehensive correspondence between the basic genres – comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony – and the myths and archetypal patterns associated with the seasonal cycle of spring, summer, fall and winter. For Frye, an archetype is "a typical or recurring image" (99) that is repeated often enough in literature and is recognized as an element of our literary experience. Archetypal patterns are most clearly discernible in myth because mythical stories present a world of pure, abstract literary design. Myth as Frye has stated is 'our structural organizing principle' and Archetypal Criticism can be regarded as the defining method to play a crucial role where literature has gained a new impetus with the arrival of multiculturalism, globalization, and cultural studies.

Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* transformed literary theory, and his contributions to Blake Studies, theories of aesthetics; theology, and social criticism, have ensured his place at the centre of culture studies. His belief that ideology is pervasive, and that mythology is related to ideology and also can oppose it, has placed Frye's work at the centre of what is one of the most significant contemporary theoretical debates: the relation between myth and ideology, between narrative and imagination. He has become the subject of unending discussions by theoretical and scientific critics. Mythical stories of gods in which characters have the greatest possible power of action are the most abstract and conventionalised of all literary modes for they have space for the highest degree of stylisation in their structure. For the reason that archetypal criticism has a larger

context of literature than other approaches, the structural postulates of literature are likely to be derived from this category. Such as realism is an art of indirect simile, and myth is an art of indirect metaphorical identity. However, when we use certain technicalities in a realistic fiction of mythical framework to bring it close to the tenets of plausibility, we are creating a displacement. Myth is a pure literary framework, naturalism is another one and romance holds the middle position in between the two.

Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* has most impressively represented the mythopoeic perspective and the 'Third Essay' of the book stands as the poetics of the entire mythopoeic movement. It focuses for the most part on Frye's theory of myths that incorporates archetypal meaning for three types of imagery: apocalyptic, demonic, and analogical. Theory of *mythos* for different seasons and their corresponding literary forms has also been discussed to examine the basis of argument Frye has made. Characterisation, structural framework and the five phases (mythic, romantic, high-mimetic, low-mimetic, and ironic) of each form (comedy, romance, tragedy, irony and satire) corresponding with the seasonal cycle of the year (spring, summer, winter and autumn) have been analysed in detail to elucidate Frye's theoretical structure. Frye contends that 'Archetypal Criticism' provides an effective means of deriving the structural principles of literature because it assumes a larger context of literature as a whole. Employing an analogy, Frye compares literature to painting, showing that just as the structural principles of painting are related to plane geometry, so too are the structural principles of literature related to religion and mythology. The Biblical archetypes of the "city" the "garden" and the "sheepfold" are as pervasive in religious writing as gods and demons are in myths. Thus Frye turns to the symbolism of the Bible and to classical mythology employing both "as a grammar of literary archetypes" to use his words. The chapter also discusses 'Rhetorical Criticism' ('Fourth Essay') that is based on a theory of genres. Four kinds of rhythms of recurrence (*epos*), continuity (prose), decorum (drama), and association (lyric) have been examined. Rhetoric organises and combines grammar and logic to bring out meaning in a work. Frye's classifications of specific forms of drama, specific thematic forms (lyric and *epos*), prose fiction, encyclopaedic forms, and non-literary prose have been examined to understand the significance as well as the literary use of these theories. 'Tentative Conclusion' of the book is highly suggestive for it explains Frye's motive behind this major theoretical venture, his approach towards literature and life, creative process and critical activity, his role as a social critic and a liberal humanist, his explanation of the real function of criticism are a few ideas to discuss here to chalk out the substantial effect *Anatomy* has produced in the world of theory and literature over the years since its publication in 1957.

Though today "archetypal criticism" as practiced by Frye and others has fallen out of favour, the archetypes remain, as is their nature. Many teachers have echoed Geoffrey Hartman's view about the usefulness of this concept of displacement or recurring myth in the classroom: "It is empirically sound: it works; it is teachable; above all, it reveals the permanence of romance". Commenting on Frye's contribution as an archetypal critic Jean O'Grady observes:

> Frye has sharpened the critic's awareness of archetypal patterns such as the hero's journey, the descent or catabasis, the struggle with the dragon and rescue of a heroine and the eventual happy marriage or recovery of a lost paradise. Unlike other workers in the same field, such as Jungians and anthropologists, he has dealt with these in a specifically literary framework. Largely because of his work, it is impossible for any self-respecting critic today to ignore genre, or to read it without sensitivity to myth and metaphor. (16)

Literature has a strong conventional element. Each poet is inspired by some other poets or poems; each work manifests some aspects analogous to other works. Milton looked into the Bible for the sources he needed and Chaucer followed Italian and French models. It has been discussed that Frye has learned all about

symbols and myths from his study of William Blake and the Bible. But the most important fact that has not been made obvious in this regard is Frye's knowledge of some of his key ideas like religious and imaginative vision, interpenetration, and structure of seasonal cycle that has been derived from his reading of Eastern texts and philosophy. For example, in the *Anatomy* there are references to the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad,* the *Mahabharata,* the *Ramayana, Sakuntala,* and the Chinese Romances. One interesting point in this case is that a poet who is capable of alluding to other poets can deliberately play with convention. On the other hand, a poet who cannot imitate other poets or refer to other sources is bound to suffer from his narrow range of knowledge. The argument arising out of this contrast is that the use of convention can benefit a poet with a rich sense of tradition and develop a good taste for learning. Eliot is the best example in this case. Therefore, the range of knowledge in a historical or documentary critic would be narrower than in an archetypal critic who has his concerns always open for the rest of the literature.

But there have been poets and critics who held an anti-archetypal view of literature. Frye has cited the instance of Whitman who urged the Muse to forget the matter of Troy and develop new themes. In one sense Whitman was perfectly right in thinking that the content of poetry should be an immediate and contemporary environment. His elegy on Abraham Lincoln "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed" is a resplendent example in favour of his argument being nowhere a conventional Adonis lament. Yet, when we talk of the form, it is as conventional as "Lycidas" complete with purple flowers thrown on coffins, a great star drooping in the west, imagery of "ever-returning spring" etc. This is how that convention persists unconsciously in every poet who has conscious knowledge. Frye says: "Poetry organizes the content of the world as it passes before the poet, but the form in which that content is organized come out of the structure of poetry itself" (*Anatomy*, 102).

Conclusion

Thus, archetypes and myths have been employed at times to reinforce the status quo and more often to look at nature, society, and relationships from fresh and radical points of view. The feminist, tribal, and Dalit discourses have been particularly productive in these retellings in recent times and hence we witness the use, revision, reinterpretation, transformation, recontextualization, and subversion of myths across cultures and literatures.

The degree of contact between the cultures of the world is greater than ever and still increasing; precisely this process creates counter-movements of withdrawal, separation, and asserted difference. These centrifugal movements, which have been dominant in literary study recently, need to be balanced by a new centripetal movement towards unity and universality, which should not mean a weakening of identity but enriching it through sharing. At present, it is interesting and beneficial to see how Frygian theories offer global visions of both literature and civilization and their historical evolution of culture in the context of multiple approaches. Myths are characterized by a 'totalising system' and create a perennial interest in the reader for they relate us to our cultural past. Mythical studies also seem to prepare us and influence the re-emergence of religion and culture-oriented work on the intellectual horizons of the 21st century. Archetypal theories have the possibility of suggesting cultural communication as a domain of research and even of encounter 'to the extent that our own myths renew their identity and their difference in contact with the myths of others' (Kushner 256). Thus, Marx was wrong in supposing in his work *Grundrisse* that myths would not survive science. They still charm us, involve us, move us, and encourage us to intervene in history positively or negatively, leading us backward or forward, speaking often as they do of utopias in the future or golden ages in the past.

References

1. Abrams, M. H. (1998). *A Glossary of Literary Terms.* 3rd ed. New Delhi: Macmillan.

2. Bodkin, M. (1934). *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination.* London: Oxford University Press.
3. Campbell, J. (1991). *The Power of Myth.* New York: Random House.
4. Frye, N. (1957) *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
5. Jung, C.G. (1969). Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious. The Collected Works of C. G. Jung. Ed. G. Adler, M. Fordham and H. Road. Trans. R. F. C. Hull. *Bollingen Series* XX, Vol. 9 i, 1959.
6. Jung, C.G. (1928). On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetic Art. *Contribution to Analytical Psychology*. Trans. H. G. and C. F. Baynes. London: Kegan Paul.
7. Hartman, G.H. (1966). Ghostlier Demarcations: The Sweet Science of Northrop Frye. *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism*. Ed. Murray Krieger. New York: Columbia University Press. pp. 109-31.
8. Kushner, E. (2001). *The Living Prism: Itineraries in Comparative Literature.* Toronto: McGill-Queen's University Press.
9. O'Grady, J. (1999). The Poetic Frye. *Journal of Canadian Studies* 34. pp. 15-26.
10. Rupprecht, C.S. (2005). Archetypal Theory and Criticism. *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism.* 2nd ed.