Literary Archetypes: The Notion and Application

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Abstract

Literary criticism is a creative domain offering a new insight or perception on a piece of literature. Late twentieth century saw the emergence of many literary avant-gardes formulating ground-breaking literary hermeneutics, facilitating the reader and the writer to perceive a literary work from different perspectives. Archetypal criticism is one such theory that emerged from Frazer's anthropological study and Jung's analytical psychology. Frye's Anatomy of Criticism became a landmark work on archetypal criticism. The collective unconscious commonly found among all human beings is known as archetypal patterns. This paper explores the inquisitiveness raised by noted psychologists on the working of human mind and the mystery and complexity surrounded it. The psychoanalytical views of Freud and Jung had great influence on art, literature, culture and on many others realms of humanities. This paper deeply delves into the contribution made by Jung on the working of human mind. Through his arduous study and research, he came out with a new concept called 'collective unconsciousness'. Jung's idea of 'collective unconsciousness' became the seed for archetypal criticism. Archetypal criticism examines the recurrent patterns found in the literatures of various nations and cultures; and in different ages – the patterns like themes, characters, settings, symbols, beliefs, rituals, etc. Northrop Frye was one of the prominent practitioners of archetypal criticism. He interpreted the literary archetypes with myths, religions and nature. The final part of this paper lists out the acclaimed literary works which are embedded with archetypal patterns.

Keywords: *Anthropology, Archetype, Ego, Persona, Psychotherapist.*

Introduction

When we look at the creation, we all become awestruck to see the myriad folds of God's creative power. Human mind cannot comprehend the creation of the universe – its function, its nature, its composite, its hues, its formation and its planets, stars and galaxies. He created high mountains and deep valleys; bright days and dark nights; fertile soil and barren deserts, and many bizarre and odd things. His creation includes mysterious and many fold sea and land animals, uncountable variety of plants, trees, flowers and fruits. He had breathed varied colours and hues to His creation. Among all His creation, man is called the crown of creation. The Holy Bible says, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Gen. 1: 27) Human body is designed with many biological systems – circulatory system, digestive system, immune system, nervous system, urinary system, reproductive system and respiratory system. The nervous system is the most idiosyncratic and treasured gift God bestowed upon man and this distinguishes man from other creations. The mystery clouding human mind – its behaviour and its cognitional function became hair raising questions to many thinkers.

The astounding behaviours of human mind became the focal subject of study and research among many neuropsychologists. Rigorous research works were done by many psychologists to find out the working of human mind and its mysteries. Many prominent neuroscientists, biologists and psychologists have postulated different theories on the working of human mind. Archetype is one among the concepts that emerged from this study and research. Archetypes explore the common core traits found among all human beings. It studies the universal commonalities inherited by all human beings irrespective of their colour, race, culture practices and belief system. A few literary critics were stimulated by this new approach and took archetypes as a tool to interpret literary texts. They began to probe the archetypal patterns found in the literary works of various nations and periods.

The beginning of archetypal criticism can be traced to the theory of ideas propounded by Plato. He claimed that the world of ideas is the true reality and all we see are only the shadows or photocopies of the ideas. Plato's theory of ideas is similar to that of Jung's collective unconsciousness. John Locke, a 17th century

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philosopher described human mind as an empty vessel and it contained simple and complex ideas. Scientific study of the mind, psychology emerged only in the second half of 19th century. The spade work was done by three German experimental psychologists and three French psychotherapists. Sir James George Frazer was a forerunner who made a thorough study on the anthropological origin of archetypal criticism. His famous work *The Golden Bough* traces a number of shared practices and beliefs among different cultures. Balwan in his *Literacy Theory* makes the following observation: "Frazer identifies with shared practices and mythological beliefs between primitive religions and modern religions. Frazer argues that the death-rebirth myth is present in almost all cultural mythologies, and is acted out in terms of growing seasons and vegetation" (166). Like Isaac Newton's theories of law and Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis emerged as a major breakthrough in the realm of psychology. Freud's elucidation of dreams and theories on sexuality roused great curiosity among scholars. Robin Robertson puts Freud's idea of dream in the following way: "Freud felt that dreams revealed all the urges we repressed during waking consciousness. As civilized beings we can't allow ourselves to consciously acknowledge our primitive feelings of lust, hatred, greed, etc. During sleep, our ability to suppress forbidden thoughts is weaker and they emerge into a shadowy consciousness." (120)

The notion of unconsciousness was reaffirmed by Carl Gustav Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist. He argued that 'consciousness is the product of the unconsciousness'. For example, you see a person, but you are not able to recognize him all at once; after some deep thought, you recognize the person. So, the unconsciousness has helped you to become conscious. Jung compartmentalized human psyche into three, namely personal consciousness (ego), personal unconsciousness (suppressed memories) and collective unconsciousness (innate, universal and hereditary).

Personal Consciousness

(Ego)

Personal Unconsciousness

(Suppressed Memories)
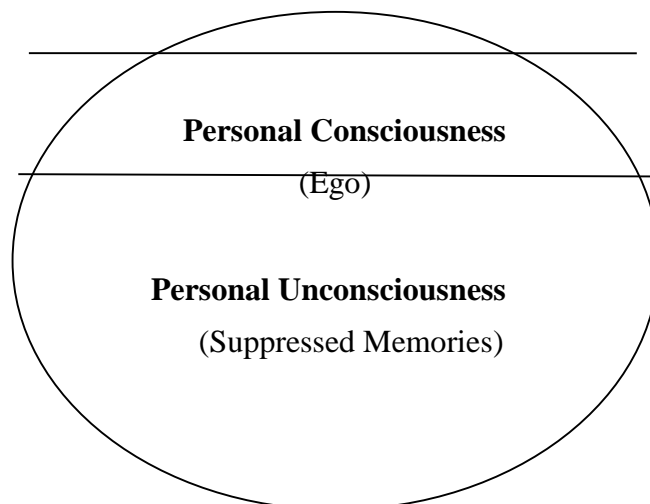
'Personal consciousness' is the personal identity of every individual. This creates a unique and distinctive identity for every individual. It contains the individuals thinking, feelings and memories. A person's 'personal consciousness' decides his/her personality. 'Personal unconsciousness is' the suppressed memories lay within every individual. Ann Hopwood in her article "Jung's Model of the Psyche" quotes the words of Jung.

Everything of which I know, but of which I am not at the moment thinking; everything of which I was once conscious but have now forgotten; everything perceived by my senses, but not noted by my conscious mind; everything which, involuntarily and without paying attention to it, I feel, think, remember, want and

do; all the future things which are taking shape in me and will sometime come to consciousness; all this is the content of the unconscious. (2)

'Collective unconscious' is a distinctive concept developed by Jung. Through his extensive research, he was able to observe that all human beings collectively possessed certain feelings, memories and thinking. This collective unconscious was inherited by all human beings – irrespective of their race, culture, faith, colour, nationality or continent. Jung in his work *The Archetypes and the Collective Conscious* has put his idea of collective unconscious in the following words: "… there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually, but is inherited." One concrete example for collective unconscious is the mother-child relationship. The child develops unquestionable trust and faith on its mother. Similarly, the mother pours all her love and affections on her child. The mother and the child evolve an indubitable relationship toward each other. This is a universal phenomenon found among all the people for ages. Another example is the universal fear all human beings have for snake. As soon as we see a snake, an unknown fear and danger gets triggered in us.

Jung calls the feelings, memories and thoughts arising from collective unconscious as archetypes. He rejected the theory of tabula rasa of John Locke. Tabula rasa theory proposes that human mind is a blank slate or white paper at birth and it does not contain any fundamental imprints of its ancestors or of its own. It is only through our sensory experiences, we gather knowledge and information. But Jung argued that every child is born laden with primordial images which serve as the basic foundation for the growth of every child. Children shape their personality based on the innate archetypes that they are born with. Jung identifies four major archetypes – the persona, the shadow, the anima/animus and the self.

'Persona' is a Latin word and it means 'mask'. It is one of the commonest character traits found among all humans. This 'persona' archetype differentiates human beings from other living things. We all wear mask and change our masks according to the required situation or place. For example, a school going child dresses according to the dress code of the school and conducts itself according to the rules and regulations of the school. As soon as it reaches the house, it changes the school mask and wears the house mask by switching to informal life style. Similarly, when it goes to a place of worship or market or theatre; its behaviour changes according to the situation and the requirement. This changing of mask or behaving according to the situation is found among all humans. Similarly, a person working in an office plays antithetical role - he wears one mask to his boss, another to his colleagues and yet another at home. Kendra Cherry notes, "The persona archetype allows people to adapt to the world around them and fit in with the society in which they live" (2). This is one of the typical archetypes found among all and it helps us to establish a balanced relationship according to the required situation.

The shadow archetype contains sex and life instincts. The shadow is the darker side of our psyche. It consists of things that are not normally accepted by the society. The shadow archetype holds our dreams, desires, weaknesses, prejudices, anger, envy, hatred, sexual desires, etc. The shadow archetype is found in all of us. The development of shadow archetype depends upon the individual's experience and environment which are not inherited. Most of the Shakespearean tragic heroes were doomed to death due to their shadow archetypes. Each one had a tragic flaw and it was the outcome of their shadow archetype. Arrogance and pride were the tragic flaws of King Lear; desire and over ambition were the flaws of Macbeth; suspicion was the shadow archetype of Othello; Antony's blind love for Cleopatra was his shadow archetype; impulsiveness was the shadow archetype of Romeo and continued doubt and delay was the shadow archetype of Hamlet.

The anima or animus is related to the sex role we play as we grow up. Society plays a vital role in shaping our sex or gender roles. This archetype is related to the particular behaviour of man and woman. The development of sexual differences among the individuals is caused by the hormones and the the environment in which the individuals were brought up; and this results in the emergence of hetero sexuals and alternate sexuals (LGBTQIA+). The male psyche in the female is called anima; and the female psyche in the male is called animus. The self as an archetype stands for the unified consciousness and unconsciousness of an individual. The disharmony between the conscious and the unconscious leads to

psychological problems in individual. The process of harmonizing the conscious and the unconscious is known as individuation or self-actualization. By individuation an individual makes himself or herself distinctive and independent.

Jung also spoke of archetypal characters, situations, instincts, symbols, etc. Jung in his "Psychology and Literature" speaks of the creative source of a writer. "The primordial experience is the source of his creativeness; it cannot be fathomed and therefore mythological imagery to give it form" (167). A writer's creativeness persists within him from the beginning. Each writer creates his own character or situation or symbols based on the archetypal pattern they were born with. At the same time, we are able to observe some commonality among all the creative writers in their writing process. For example, many writers use water as the symbol of purification, life, birth, fertility and rejuvenation.

The mid 20th century witnessed an extraordinary explosion in the field of literary criticism. A number of celebrated avant-gardes stormed the world of literary criticism with their innovative approaches by giving illuminating interpretation to literature. The old order of criticism witnessed a sea change towards its approach to literature. The call for new critical approaches was given by T. S. Eliot and he was followed suit by many socio-political thinkers with their own ways of elucidation. Some compared literature with political ideologies; and a few other critics put the reader at the centre of the text. Postmodernism, postcolonialism, Marxism, cultural studies, structuralism and poststructuralism became dominant areas in critical approach. Gender based criticism too had its own role to play. Sigmund Freud's theories on psychology was experimented as a touchstone method by many critics. Myth criticism also emerged as a prominent one. A new critical approach called archetypal criticism emerged in 1934 with a landmark literary work *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* by Maud Bodkin. Archetypal criticism made its intelligible inroads into English criticism through Northrop Frye's seminal literary work *Anatomy of Criticism* (1959).

The word 'archetype' comes from a Greek word 'archetypos'. 'Arch' means 'chief' or 'principle' and 'type' means an 'image' or 'impression'. So the term 'archetype' means 'most important image or principle model'. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* defines archetype in a single sentence: "Stated simply, archetypes are universal symbols."(184) When images and symbols are used by different people at different locations and different times they become universal archetypes. Archetypal criticism was influenced by mythological criticism. Jung came out with the idea that myth-forming components are found in the unconscious psyche of every human being and archetypes are the manifestation of these components. M. H. Abrams in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines archetype in the following manner:

In literary criticism the term archetype denotes recurrent narrative designs, patterns of action, character-types, themes and images which are identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myths, dreams and even social rituals. Such recurrent items are held to be the result of elemental and universal forms or patterns in the human psyche, whose effective embodiment in a literary work evokes a profound response from the attentive reader, because he or she shares the archetypes expressed by the author. (12)

Northrop Frye, Maud Bodkin, G. Wilson Knight, Robert Graves, Philip Wheelwright, Richard Chase, Leslie Fiedler and Joseph Campbell were some of the critics who practised archetypal criticism. Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* subtitled *Psychological Studies of Imagination* examined the forms, patterns and images recurrently used by poets all over the world and in all cultures.

Northrop Frye, a Canadian literary critic is considered to be the foremost voice of archetypal criticism. His first critical work *Fearful Symmetry: Study of William Blake* associated the symbolic images used by Blake with the archetypal images. His most noted work is *Anatomy of Literary Criticism* (1957). This book has four chapters and the title of the third chapter is "Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths". This essay draws a number of archetypal images from myths. According to Frye, there are seven major categories of archetypal images – the divine world, the human world, the animal world, the vegetable world, the mineral world, the fire world and the watery world.

Frye's "The Archetypes of Literature" speaks on the origin of literary genres. In the essay, he writes, "In the solar cycle of the day, the seasonal cycle of the year, and the organic cycle of human life, there is a single

pattern of significance, out of which myth constructs a central narrative…" (429). The four major literary genres are connected with the four solar cycles, seasonal cycles and human life cycle. The given table illustrates the same:

Solar Cycle	Seasonal Cycle	Life Cycle	Literary Genre	Literary Characters
Dawn	Spring	Birth	Comedy	Birth of a hero, Revival, Creation, Resurrection
Noon	Summer	Youth	Romance	Triumph, Sacred marriage, Entering paradise
Sunset	Autumn	Death Phase	Tragedy	Fall of a hero, Violent death, Sacrifice
Darkness	Winter	Dissolution	Satire	Triumph of dark power, Return of chaos

There are two sets of archetypes that are commonly traced from various literary pieces. They are; character archetypes and situational archetypes. Besides these two, archetypal motifs and archetypal images have also been studied by some scholars. Character archetypes are traced based on the behaviour and attitude of literary characters. It could be the hero or the villain; it could be the father or mother; and it could be the friend or the foe. The characteristic of hero archetype is the same in every nation and in every period. Heroes are usually courageous, noble, honest, well determined, loyal and helpful. They fight for a society or larger community. In J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, Harry is the hero. He embarks on the mission of destroying the villian Lord Voldemort. Achilles is an epic hero grafted by Homer in his *The Eliad*. Situational archetypes are the events connected with the journey of the protagonist. They are very important and critical moments connected with the life of the hero. A hero's initiation, his fight, his victory and his celebration are situational archetypes. Situational archetypes play a significant role in spinning a good story. Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is a good example for situational archetypes.

Cain is an archetypal character found in the Bible. He stands as the symbol of fratricide. Cain, the first born child on the earth and the first murderer on the earth has become an archetypal character in many literary works. He kills his younger brother Abel out of jealous. After the murder, God asked him, where his brother Abel was. Cain replied, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper"? (Gen. 4: 9) By saying this, Cain becomes the first liar on the earth. "Cain is represented as the fratricide, the rebel, the wanderer and the founder of civilization" (1), observes Paola Di Gennaro in *Wandering through Guilt: The Cain Archetype in the Twentieth-Century Novel*. Cain and Abel episode has also emerged as a sibling rivalry archetype. We can find Cain like characters in many literary works, who committed sin and later feel guilty and make amends for their sin. In Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, the whisky priest feels guilty for his sins and tries to make atonement. The following are situational archetypes used by Hemingway in *The Old Man and the Sea*: Merlin leaving Santiago, his eighty-four days fishless fight, his eighty-fifth day journey, the huge catch of marlin, his fight with the marlin, his return journey and reaching the shore.

The journey archetype is another common one found in many literary works. The hero/heroine undergoes a number of challenges and hurdles before achieving his or her final goal or stage. Journey archetypes usually have the traces of adventure, ordeal, tests and twists. We can see the journey archetype in Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus, the king of Ithaca takes ten years to reach his country after the Trojan war. He travels through many strange and bizarre islands. Each island posses him with tough and formidable challenges. Some well known journey archetypal novels are, John Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress*, Thomas Malory's *La Morte d'Arthur*, Mark Twain's *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* and Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. There are a few films which are directed on the journey archetypal pattern; films like *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Ring*, *Harry Potter* movies, *Spider Man* movies, etc.

Water and fire are used as image archetype by many writers. Fire image symbolises birth, enlightenment, creative energy and thinking. Water archetype includes ordinary water, sea and river water. Water symbolizes purification, redemption, fertility and growth. The usage of water is commonly found in all religions. Muslims do a purification ritual called 'wudu' before they go for prayer; similarly Hindus offer their prayers after a bath or holy tip; Buddhists offer seven bowls of water to Lord Buddha and other holy persons in order to redeem them from greed; and holy water is sprinkled in Christian Eucharistic services and in baptism.

Archetypes play a vital role for the writer to come out with an innovative literary work and the reader to decipher what the writer wants to convey. A writer awakens the readers' collective unconscious through the usage of archetypes her/ his literary work. Similarly, a reader is able to decode and understand a literary work because of the collective unconscious the reader possesses. Jung's theory of the collective unconscious is the base for archetypal criticism. All the literary works are the outcome of certain archetypes and they could be analyzed through the lens of archetypal criticism.

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