
FROM 'LITERARY HISTORY' TO 'LITERARY ANTHROPOLOGY': AN APPLICATIONAL STUDY OF NORTHROP FRYE'S ARCHETYPAL APPROACH

SUPRIYA BAIJAL

Abstract: This paper endeavors to study the theory of Archetypes with reference to Northrop Frye (1912-1991) and attempts an applicational case study with reference to D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* and Arthur Miller's *A View From the Bridge*. The seminal essay of Frye *The Archetypes of Literature* (1951) is representative of and wholly consistent with Frye's theory of archetypes. Literature is encyclopedic in nature which incorporates almost varied disciplines into its gamut. In order to study literary forms Frye relies greatly on the insights and methods of anthropology and is of the opinion that a search for archetypes in literature is therefore "a kind of literary anthropology". Further, Frye states that we need to move from literary history i.e. 'the history of ideas' towards literary anthropology i.e. a 'study of man' in order to establish the 'central coordinating principle'. As a literary anthropologist, Frye relates the narrative patterns to the creation of rituals, imagery to the moments of epiphany, and rhythm to the natural cycle and so on. Frye establishes two approaches, the Inductive Approach and the Deductive Approach. The Inductive Approach "is a movement towards the archetype in a process of backing up" while the Deductive Approach is a movement from the pre-literary to the literary categories. Frye perceives the unity of entire literature with the broad vision of World Literature. The applicational case study of D.H. Lawrence and Arthur Miller reveals that there is 'primordial freshness' in literature and as the concept of globalization has gained impetus similarly Northrop Frye's concept of the Archetypes also moves towards the certain recurrent primitive patterns thereby establishing the universality in literature which is very much in tune with the today's global world.

Keywords: Archetypal approach, inductive method, literary anthropology, Quest myth, Recurrent narrative patterns.

Introduction:

Northrop Frye's Archetypal Theory A Brief Overview:

This paper endeavors to study the theory of Archetypes with reference to Northrop Frye (1912-1991) and attempt an applicational case study with reference to D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* and Arthur Miller's *A View From the Bridge*. The seminal essay of Frye *The*

Archetypes of Literature (1951) is representative of and wholly consistent with Frye's theory of archetypes. "Like Aristotle, Frye is a schematic thinker, attempting nothing less than the creation of a new and comprehensive Poetics, "a systematic structure of knowledge" to replace the "leisure class conversation" that passes for critical discourse"¹. In the present information age, literary criticism and theory has become one of the most important streams of literature. According to Frye, a literary critic is a researcher who finds out something new and different. "He observes that literature is the central division of "humanities" flanked on one side by history and on other by philosophy."²

Frye's explanation of 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' approaches to literary study gives impetus to his archetypal approach. He emphasizes that a critic's approach must be 'centripetal' instead of 'centrifugal'. His notion of Centripetality is very much in conformity with the current interdisciplinary studies and the very notion of inter-textuality in which a

critic while judging a work of art must keep the other branches like anthropology, history, psychology, economics, pragmatics, etc. at the periphery focusing on the centre i.e. on literature.

Literature is encyclopedic in nature which incorporates almost all disciplines in it. Frye views that World Literature is an ocean and different literatures of different nations are the contributing streams culminating into this ocean. Frye through his archetypal approach has tried to integrate all these contributory literary streams, thus evolving the concept of universal literature. Therefore Frye's intention is "to supply the missing organizing principle for criticism, a "central hypothesis" that will put into perspective various partial or fragmentary critical approaches"³.

From 'Literary History' to 'Literary Anthropology' A Quest for Archetypes:

In order to study literary forms Frye relies greatly on the insights and methods of anthropology and is of the opinion that a search for archetypes in literature is therefore "a kind of literary anthropology"⁴. Further, Frye states that we need to move from literary history i.e. 'the history of ideas' towards literary anthropology i.e. a 'study of man' in order to establish the 'central coordinating principle'. As a literary anthropologist, Frye relates the narrative patterns to the creation of rituals, imagery to the moments of epiphany, and rhythm to the natural cycle and so on. Further, Frye says that in

literature there is no place for linearity since it is cyclical and thus allowing recurrence of patterns. Similarly, there is also a recurrent pattern in the natural cycle and therefore Frye establishes that when there is synchronization between the human and natural energies, it leads to the formation of a ritual.

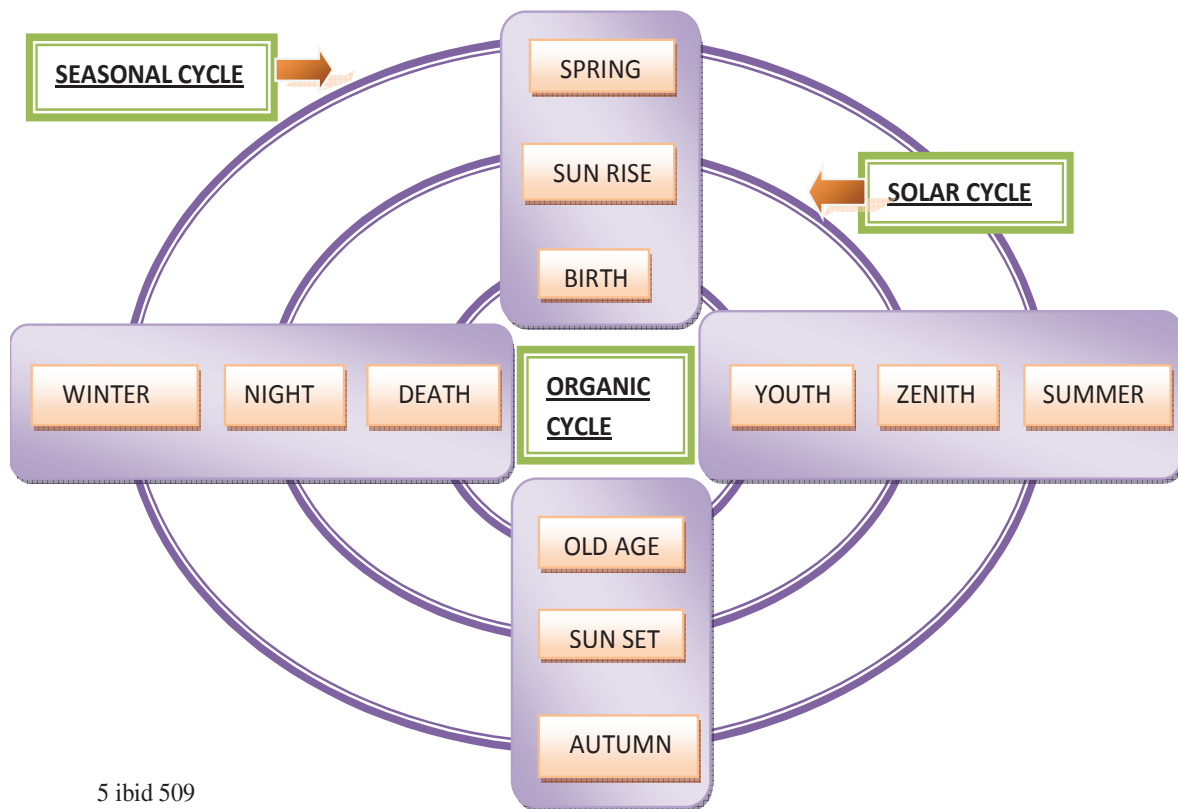
For instance, the Egyptians used to bury the effigy of corn-god Osiris along with corn seeds. This burial followed a lamentation over his death and the sprouting of the corn was celebrated by Egyptians symbolic of the birth of the Corn God after which this became a repetitive phenomenon and ultimately assumed the form of a ritual. Myths were the result of the narrative patterns which were passed down as

tales from one generation to another thereby becoming a part of human culture. Frye stresses that “the myth is central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual and the archetypal narrative to the oracle.”[5]

Thus, he states that the central myth of all the literature is the ‘quest myth’ which has its traces in the four distinct phases that correspond to the four aspects of cyclical recurrence. We find the same rhythm in organic, solar and seasonal cycles as well. Like, the symbol of birth, sunrise and spring symbolize celebration while death, night and winter symbolize darkness, etc. thus highlighting some sort of synchronization.

Diagrammatic Representation of Seasonal, Solar and Organic Cycles:

Frye’s Approach



5 ibid 509

Therefore in order to trace these recurrent patterns in literature, Frye establishes two approaches, the Inductive Approach and the Deductive Approach. The Inductive Approach “is a movement towards the archetype in a process of backing up”[6]. While the Deductive Approach is a movement from the pre-literary to the literary categories. In order to explain this backing up movement Frye draws on the example of the origin of Greek drama. He says that as Greek drama emerged from the Greek religion.

Similarly English drama also had its roots in medieval religion. The Inductive Approach facilitates the understanding of the relationship between the pre-literary categories i.e., symbols, images, rituals, etc. and the various genres i.e. sophisticated categories.

Applicational Case Study of Frye’s Archetypal Theory: This section deals with the application of the Inductive Approach as observed in various works. Frye takes us back to primitive times to find out the unifying thread which unites the entire World

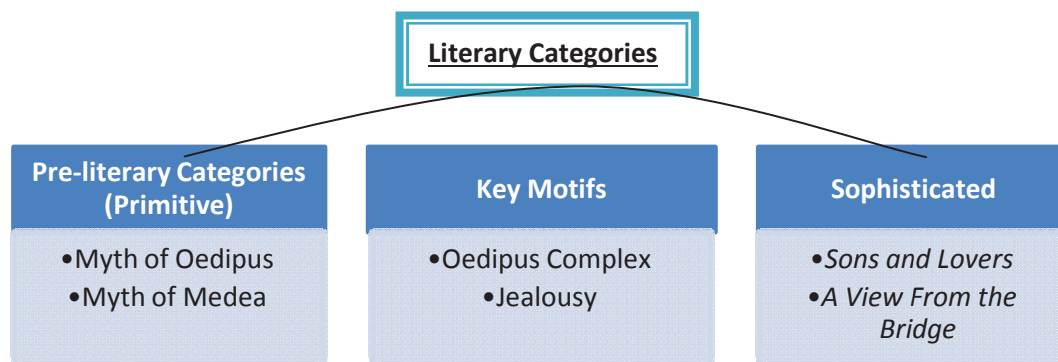
Literature. Like man has evolved from ‘barbarianism’ to ‘sophistication’ so is the evolutionary graph of literature. When we read literary works we find the glimpses of the antiquity as well as the primitive culture. Frye perceives the unity of entire literature with the broad vision of World Literature.

Like D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* deals with the ‘Oedipus Complex’ which is a psychological phenomenon in which a son shows strong sexual affinity for his mother. For instance, Paul Morel expresses his anguish at his having being involved with Miriam since it has deeply affected his mother. The writer remarks that “Paul was dissatisfied with himself and with everything .The deepest of his love belonged to his mother. When he felt he had hurt her, or wounded his love for her, he could not bear it.”⁷ This phenomenon was established by Sigmund Freud in his psychoanalytical theory. In this theory, Freud states that there are 5 stages of psychosexual development and the ‘Oedipus Complex’ occurs in the phallic stage.

Now, the question arises whether this exploration of the ‘Oedipus Complex’ has occurred for the first time in literature or it has some connections with the works written in the past. Further, we also need to delve into the fact as to what is the source of this particular psychological phenomenon. Now, by applying Frye’s Inductive Approach, we find the traces of this ‘Oedipus Complex’ in ancient Greek literature i.e. in Sophocles’ play *Oedipus-Rex*. It is a Greek tragedy which has its roots in ancient Greek mythology and it deals with the mythical legend of Oedipus, the king of Thebes, who in his ignorance married his mother and killed his father. Here “the

myth was localized at Thebes, consequently, Oedipus became the king of Thebes and was inserted in the genealogy of the kingly Theban house. We are able to state that the tale of the exposure of Oedipus and of his marrying his mother was joined in an age which long preceded the historical age with the folk-tale of the young man who by guessing the riddle of sphinx won the queen and the kingdom.”^[8]

By the above analysis we see that the ‘Oedipus Complex’ has its roots in the ancient myths. Similarly, Arthur Miller’s play *A View from the Bridge* deals with the theme of jealousy. This play deals with an Italian American longshoreman Eddie Carbone who develops an unhealthy obsession towards his orphaned niece Catherine. Due to this obsession he becomes extremely jealous when Catharine gets involved with Rodolpho. For instance, due to this jealousy Eddie ends up fighting with his wife Beatrice. “When are you going to leave her alone? B, the guy is no good.”⁹ Ultimately it is this very jealousy that leads to Eddie’s death. If we go back we find a similar theme in the Renaissance play *Othello*, written by Shakespeare. In this play, Iago instigates Othello against his wife and puts a doubt in his mind regarding her faithfulness which fires up his jealousy. Iago remarks, “O beware, my lord of jealousy! It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock the meat it feeds on.”¹⁰ Out of this jealousy, he kills his innocent wife, Desdemona. When we further move back we see a similar scenario in Seneca’s *Medea*. There also Medea kills her children to avenge her husband Jason’s betrayal. This play of Seneca has its roots in the Greek Mythical legend of Jason and the Argonauts.



Conclusion: Therefore, the study reveals that there is ‘primordial freshness’ in literature and as the concept of globalization has gained impetus similarly Northrop Frye’s concept of the Archetypes also moves

towards the certain recurrent primitive pattern thereby establishing the universality in literature which is very much in tune with the today’s global world.

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Supriya Baijal/SW 34 Soami Bagh, Agra 282005/
Student of Post Graduation/supriyabaijal@yahoo.co.in