

"IMAGINATION AT THE SCHOOL OF SEASONS" - FRYE'S EDUCATED IMAGINATION – AN OVERVIEW

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Northrop Frye's *The Educated Imagination* (1964) consists of essays expressive of Frye's approach to literature as a naturalist where he goes to the extent of citing the position of a shipwrecked man left alone in an uninhabited island who confronts nature like a primitive, in the primitive stages of civilization. These essays give evidences of his power for analysis, and literary imagination, which is based on the concept of biorhythm, related to the recurrence of seasons in nature.

To understand what Frye's idea of myth is, the reader must turn to *The Educated Imagination*. As he says if we imagine ourselves in the position of a shipwrecked man alone on an island, we would realize how we are suddenly thrust into a world of primitive topographical surroundings. As the primitive science begins here, the imagination assimilates nature to human forms, creating a constructive power and artistic faculty in man to conjure up new possibilities for a more congenial existence. This brings out the concept of biorhythm with the help of which man attempts to put himself into some sort of intelligible relationship with nature who seizes first upon the recurring patterns of the solar year, night and day, and the human growth itself.

In his essay "The Motive for Metaphor" Frye describes a shipwrecked man in an uninhabited island who confronts nature around him as objective which is not related to him any way. For him the place holds no human meaning though he is curious to know about it. This man sees the island as beautiful, austere or terrible. According to Frye, this man's inner consciousness tries to describe the qualities of the island using adjectives like wet or green or beautiful. Frye describes this consciousness of the mind thus:

This is the speculative or contemplative position of the mind, the position in which the arts and sciences begin, although they don't stay there very long. The sciences begin by accepting the facts and the evidence about an outside world without trying to alter them. (EI 18)

Speaking of the shipwrecked man, Frye insists on the experience of the individual under primitive conditions of existence for whom doing something in the world around is more important than simply looking at it. In such a situation adaptation becomes a necessity. Quoting the engineering skill of the bees and the theory of adaptation behind the life of every species and human beings, Frye brings out how the basic principle of creation is conceived in the mind of the human beings. This capacity to create either a city or literature emerges from the vision or model in the mind to construct what man wants. Resisting, reshaping and changing the world to a harmonious living is the outcome of the desire and vision of what man wants it to be. The existence of the human beings itself was based on the biological rhythm that man developed according to the seasonal cycles of spring, summer, winter and autumn and the nature around him. But this in-built rhythm in human body was not sufficient enough for him to make a harmonious living. The desire to make a harmony of life around instigated man to visualize in his imagination the forms of city, garden and a state. Civilization and literature have thus become the outcome of imagination. Frye points out that, as there is the same concept of biological rhythm

behind literature also, all forms of literature must have been created from the imagination which desired to make a harmony in all living conditions. This illustration of the shipwrecked man insists the fact of biorhythm instigating the human imagination.

Rhythms mean not only the biorhythm with the cosmic rhythm but everything in the closer surroundings of man that matters much to him in his life. The wet ground, lush green wood, blue sky, cool winds, sunlight and the hard earth demand a response from him. It is this response which is the source of creation, referred to in Frye's words, as the position in which arts and sciences begin. When man builds a city and forms a garden, he is not separating himself from nature but constructs a human world and separates it from the rest of the world. This separation is mainly intended to protect it from the disharmony around it.

If what is imagined is possible, it is accomplished in action and if it is not possible it remains in the visualized form of literature. When man confronts what he doesn't like, his imagination expects what he wants to be there. Frye says that this expectation both in the scientist and artist is based on the surroundings which man wants to develop with a suitable condition for living protected from the dangerous forms of nature. When it doesn't get into action man loses his identity with his surroundings. Then the literary artist visualizes them in his imagination and projects them in the form of paradises, cities, and gardens up in the heaven and even down the sea. The archetypal criticism directs its attention to such archetypal images of paradises, cities and gardens.

The situation confronted by the shipwrecked man in the island is an area of applied arts and science. He is in a position of adapting himself to the situation. Frye explains this in his essay "The Motive for Metaphor" that it is the, "process of adapting to the environment, or rather of transforming the environment in the interests of one species, that goes on among animals and plants as well as human beings" (EI 21).

Frye portrays the individual in the new surroundings as being split by what he likes and dislikes. Anyway he tries to humanize the island by planning out a garden, forming a path and farm, which according to Frye, are the archetypes of farm, garden, highway and city. Frye, by describing this consciousness and the designing mind of man, is viewing everything in literature from a scientific point of view. The description of the fresh human experience with nature is based on the basic idea of biorhythm in science. Frye says that we can not distinguish the arts from the sciences, and according to him a "highly developed science and a highly developed art are very close together, psychologically and otherwise" (EI 24).

This statement proves that when Frye searches for archetypes in myths and mythology, his study of literature is closely associated with the primitive human experiences of the basic biorhythmic life which brought about civilization in the world. According to him, literature belongs to the world man constructs but not the world he sees. So it is clear when the writer describes about spring, summer winter and autumn, it is not the nature that is primary, but the effects of nature in the world that man constructs. Imaginative stories describing a life present only the forms of cities and gardens, the signs of human civilization. Hence there is the symbolic representation of the immediate experience of the human world. Frye stresses the point saying that literature describes the experience in life by assimilating it through analogies.

According to him, the state of human consciousness that separates an individual from the rest of the world develops an attitude to create a human way of life in the world and then visualizes a model of the world that it would like to have. He states that literature uses various figures of speech, like similes and metaphors, to suggest the identity between the human mind and the world outside it. To explain this Frye uses the illustration of the shipwrecked man. He further comments how the archetypes and myths are formed in the actual primitive life situation in his essay, "The Singing School" :

But suppose you were enough of a primitive to develop a genuinely imaginative life of your own. You'd start by identifying the human and the nonhuman worlds in all sorts of ways. The commonest, and the most important for literature, is the god, the being who is human in general form and character, but seems to have some particular connection with the outer world, a storm-god or sun-god or tree-god. (EI 38-39)

The identity of the human relationship with the organic and inorganic world created archetypes of the sun-god, storm-god, tree-god and so on. Mythologies are the stories of such gods or heroes who undertake various adventures, and are either successful or killed in their encounter, or come back to life again. The development of the story is associated with the movement of the sun across the sky into the dark progression of seasons through winter and spring. The association of nature with human activities and the life of the human beings are reflective of the biological rhythm that human beings developed. Eventually they started identifying the human and the non-human world, which created archetypes and myths. In his view, all literary works are conventional in their identity of human life and emotions with nature. There is progress and civilization but there is no change in the natural life of man when it is associated with nature. It is obvious in many aspects of our life. We plan out our life and schedule our work according to the seasons. We go for tours and picnic during summer, repair the bridges before winter and store food for the winter and thus our activities continue in the same process in harmony with autumn and spring seasons. So long there is day and night, sleep and wakefulness, man will continue to identify him with nature. The same will be in the process of literary imagination that the theme and stories will always go back to myths and archetypes. It is this scientific approach to literature that makes Frye conclude that all stories and themes are the reconstruction from the myths and legends we have. When convention is reflected in literature, literature is nothing but the reconstruction of the recurring patterns of literary themes and forms.

When Frye talks about the shipwrecked man in the position of Robinson Crusoe in his essay, "The Singing School", he observes :

If you were developing an imagination in your new world that belonged to that world, you'd start off something like this: I feel separated and cut off from the world around me, but occasionally I've felt that it was really a part of me, and I hope I'll have that feeling again, and that next time it won't go away. (EI 53)

Running away from the unfriendly forms of nature and seeking refuge and protection in some care or the shade of the rock was the universal experience of the human beings that first underwent the struggle of being alienated from nature. But the confidence to proceed further in seeking an identity of finding nature as a part of him is due to the biorhythm that the human beings have. It is this loss and regaining of

identity that Frye finds in the framework of all adventure, death, disappearance and marriage and the resurrection of the heroes which are the focal points of tragedy, comedy, irony, satire and so on. The archetypal and mythical characteristics slowly fade away from literature. But the biological rhythm that man has, has not disappeared. This is

evident in his essay where he makes a note that:

We have to look at the figures of speech a writer uses, his images and symbols, to realize that underneath all the complexity of human life that uneasy stare at an alien nature is still haunting us, and the problem of surmounting it still with us. Above all, we have to look at the total design of a writer's work, the title he gives to it, and his main theme, which means his point in writing it, to understand that literature is still doing the same job that mythology did earlier, but filling in its huge cloudy shapes with sharper lights and deeper shadows. (EI 56-57)

According to Frye all themes of literature belong to one big interlocking family. All theories and stories resemble some other story or literary work that one must have read or come across. This makes it possible to have a general idea of the basic principle of literature. Any work of art shows a repetition. In Frye's argument this is due to the impulse to identify human and natural worlds in the form of literature and literary categories as tragedies, comedies, satire or romance. They take up a typical conventional way in which the stories are told. According to him the literary experience is recognizably the same and conventional but the description of the literary experience only varies:

All themes and characters and stories that you encounter in literature belong to one big interlocking family. You can see how true this is if you think of such words as tragedy or comedy or satire or romance; certain typical ways in which stories get told. (EI 48-9)

Frye says that all writers express their literary experience in imitation of other literature. They are formed on some principle of repetition or recurrence. In his essay "The Singing School" he writes that, a literature, "has a lot to do with identifying the human world with the natural world around it, or finding analogies between them. In nature the most obvious repeating or recurring feature is the cycle" (EI 49-50). The recurring features of natural cycles are used in many primitive myths either in the form of images or in identity with life of the main character or else action.

Frye argues that the analogy that he finds in literature, analogous to the natural cycles is to be found not only in literary images, but also in the literary forms. The biorhythmic principle is found in the emotions of the characters, the incidents they come across, and the main theme of the story. He further observes, that a, "great many primitive stories and myths, then, would attach themselves to this cycle which stretches like a backbone through the middle of both human and natural life". (EI 50)

In the primitive situation human beings were more preoccupied with human relationship and also with non-human nature. As civilization developed man achieved a power over nature that he is not much threatened by the external influences of nature. So people are less conscious of their direct relationship with nature and are more preoccupied with the human life which supplies a

driving force in the modern writer to write about the misery, frustration and absurdity of human existence which literature reflects.

Frye says that the correspondence of the natural and human world created symbols. The quality of nature is attributed to human characteristics, which become allegories and take up a literary form. They form the central stories of all literature particularly the Bible, and Greek and Roman literatures. As the old is reshaped, they are always alluded to. All these allusions, allegories and symbols are the identifications formed by the human mind. In "The Giants in Time" Frye writes that, "The poet, too, is also an identifier: everything he sees in nature he identifies with human life. That's why literature, and more particularly poetry, shows the analogy to primitive minds that I mentioned in my first talk" (EI 76).

In his essay "Verticles of Adam" he suggests that the Bible and the classical mythology give the framework for all imaginative kinds of stories. So according to him training given to students in these will enable them to acquire a fundamental knowledge about literature.

The Classical myths give us, much more closely than the Bible, the main episodes of the central myth of the hero whose mysterious birth, triumph and marriage, death and betrayal and eventual rebirth follow the rhythm of the sun and the seasons. (EI 112)

As these episodes are closely associated with nature and natural cycles, Frye connects them with the rhythms of nature. This main literary experience is expressive of the universal human experience in the midst of nature associated with the rhythms of nature. Frye's argument is that as the fundamental knowledge in arithmetic is universally the same, the fundamental study and framework of the knowledge of literature is also the same. The knowledge can be acquired through a study of myth and archetypes, which are expressive of the universal experiences related to love, marriage, adventures, struggle, war, religion, patriotism and many such aspects concerned with the human emotions. This brings forth the unity of the literary works at the universal level. According to him a distant view of the structure of literary works would expose the resemblance between literary works. In "Verticle of Adam" he observes that, "The old primitive association of human and natural worlds is still there in the background, but in, say. a novel of Henry James, it's a long way in the background" (EI 120).

REFERENCES

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