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Towards an Anti-Barthesian Reading of Poetry: "Kublakhan" as a Case Study

A B S T R A C T

Samuel Taylor's Coleridge's poem "Kublakhan" was composed when the poet experienced an opium-influenced dream and after reading a book on Xanadu and the Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan. The present study aims to analyze this genuine poem by means of Roland Barthes's theory of the author's death. It also refers to Sigmund Freud's principles of psycho-analytical criticism. It focuses on the interpretation of the dream in it as a kin way to make a literary analysis of it. The study significantly defies "The death of the author" theory, arguing that "Kublakhan" is a representation of Coleridge's *id*; hence a close reading of the poet's biography would help better to understand the scattered images of the poem. The study contends that "Kublakhan" is a reflection of Coleridge's abandonment and self-defeat. It resembles his wish to fulfill his desire for personal success and self- confidence.

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نحو قراءة نقدية تناقض البارزسيانية: كوبلاخان كنموذج دراسة

ا.م.د. اروى حسين محمد / كلية التربية الانسانية/ قسم اللغة الانكليزية

الخلاصة:

نظم الشاعر صاموئيل تايلور كوليردج قصيدة كوبلاخان اثناء نومه متأثرا بجرعة افiony كان قد تناولها حيث كان قبل نومه يقرأ كتابا في التاريخ مدينة زاندو والامبراطور المغولي كوبلاي خان. تهدف هذه الدراسة الى تحليل قصيدة كوبلاخان بالاشارة الى نظرية رولاند بارزس موت المؤلف وهي تشير ايضا الى نظرية سيغموند فرويد في التحليل النفسي حيث تركز على نظريته في تفسير الحلم في دراسة وتحليل القصيدة. تناقض الدراسة نظرية بارزس وتؤكد على اهمية ربط العمل الادبي بمؤلفه لدراسة بعض الاعمال

الادبية ومنها هذه القصيدة. حيث تستخلص الدراسة ان قصيدة كوبلاخان ماهي الا انعكاس لوحده واندهاره الذاتي وهي تعكس ايضا رغبته في تحقيق النجاح والثقة بالنفس

Introduction

Coleridge's poem "kublakhan" was written in 1797 during the most productive years of years of the poet's life when he living the County of Somerset. He mentions that this poem is part of a "hallucinatory dream" which he experienced after taking opium. (Al-Douri, 2013, 106) It is an expressive wish for the poet's fulfillment and an attempt to project his ego. It reflects an envious desire inside the poet for strength. It is also described as the product of Coleridge the man with all his complexities, all his spiritual blindness and insight. "Kublakhan" represents the poet's creativity which is directed towards his deep unconsciousness. Coleridge brings his consciousness into will to retrieve the broken pieces of the poem that are forgotten as a result of the Porlock story. The poet mentioned that the poem came to him in a dream, but when he woke- up and was transcribing it, he was interrupted by a visitor and was unable to remember the rest of it. This poem, like most of his poetry, has a fragmented style which corresponds to the pattern of his mind which was fragmentary as well. It is an embodiment of the poet's inclination towards personal progress to pursue inner wishes and ideals.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge(1772-1834) was known as a passive dreamer and a "bookworm" since his childhood(Grieson&Smith:295). His horse of imagination led him away from reality and his spiritual weakness led him to find the compensation in the illusive relief of opium until he gradually started to drown into a "maelstrom" that caused his eventual physical weakness; nevertheless the biographical information agrees that he had a profound mind that combined intellectual clarity with emotional intensity(Rajimwale:266).

Coleridge was marked by his teachers as "an extraordinary, dreamy schoolboy"(Mooney:168). He was an accomplished scholar at university but he found little stimulation there and left without taking a degree. He was increasingly addicted to opium to recollect himself from rheumatism, yet his physical and psychological health were declining since he fell into feelings of depression and remorse. In 1794, Coleridge shared a dream with one of his colleagues at the university to create an ideal, democratic community at America but the dream collapsed because it was like seeds that were not put into a good soil to grow as a healthy plant.

Coleridge's influence by the German philosophers enabled him to develop his own theory of imagination in his critical work "Biographia Literaria(1817).

He depended on the mystery of imagination as a creative power in his poetry. Most of his poems have a dreamy-vision nature which reflects his conviction of the human mind's ability to create new visions and worlds through registering human actions, attitudes and impressions. Dr.Rajimwale affirms that Coleridge depended for his poetic visions on external mediums as dreams and opium. He adds that Coleridge had once explained that "dreams are not mere shadows but a thick substance in his life"(ibid).

In his essay "The Death of the Author" (1967), Roland Barthes provides a new theoretical perspective on the author/reader influence on the text. Barthes essentially argues that the author has no sovereignty over his text which belongs to the reader who interprets them. When contends that when readers encounter a literary text, they need to think of the meaning behind the text rather than the author who composed it. Text employ symbols which are deciphered by readers, and since function of the text is to be read, the author and process of writing is irrelevant. Barthes suggests that critical reading involves a rewriting of the text's meaning. His theory deviates from the traditional approach of literary criticism which focuses more on the author's biography and intentions and original meaning in mind. Instead Barthes asks us to adopt a more text oriented approach that focuses on the interaction of the reader, not the writer, with it. This means that the text is free from its author and more open to readers' layers of interpretation.

"Kublakhan" and Modern Theory

Literature moves the readers since it deals with patterns of life and various human experience, hence the symbolic content of any literary work is a central element to make critical analysis. The literary works of the Romantics are still alive and compelling until the present time. They provide a material for multiple critical readings which are framed by diverse discourses. Interest in romantic poetry by modern theorists is essentially generated from the idea that these works embody an artistic representation of self-consciousness. McGann's book *The Romantic Ideology* (1983), explains the way that romantic poetry is still dominating in twentieth-century academic and critical responses through ideas and discourses that are related to Romanticism. Harold Bloom, as a case in point, provides deservedly successful modern critical reading of the Romantics which deviate from the traditional norms of literary theory. The view of the romantic effect on the modern critical thinking was well exemplified and confirmed during the time when the Deconstruction school of literary criticism was mostly glorified. Deconstruction " contradicted the approach of so-called New Criticism that tended to see the great romantic texts as eternal monuments that reached to a canonical Empyrean above the historical contingences of their production. "(Moulin, 2005:2)

Coleridge's poem "kublakhan" is an expressive wish for the poet's fulfillment and an attempt to project his ego. It reflects an envious desire inside the poet for strength. It is the product of Coleridge the man with all his complexities, all his spiritual blindness and insight. Coleridge mentioned that the poem came to him in a dream, but when he woke- up and was transcribing it, he was interrupted by a visitor and was unable to remember the rest of it. This poem, like most of his poetry, has a fragmented style which corresponds to the pattern of his mind which was fragmentary as well. The psychological analysis of this poem depends largely on biographical details from the poet's life.

Despite his fast intellectual and poetic growth, Coleridge suffered a series of depressions along the course of his personal life. He had a "depressed, moping, friendless" school life.(ibid:8) His worse debts led him to a British cavalry unit in 1793, but he was discharged in 1794 when he returned to school before completing his study. On October, 1795, Coleridge married Sara Fricker, the sister of his friend's wife- to- be Southey out of his sense of duty. He soon realized how unfit they were for one another. However, they had four children of whom one died when Coleridge was away in Germany. As the years went by, the company of Sara became utterly unbearable to him, as he explains in one of his letters to his acquaintance John Morgan:

"...the sight of the woman would destroy me"... "I played the fool, and cut the throat of my Happiness, of my genius, of my utility, in compliment to the merest phantom of over-strained Honor"

(COLLECTED LETTERS III, 73-74)

Coleridge also experimented bad luck when each of his publications, whether journalistic, literary or philosophical encountered hostile reception and critical rejection although they represented promising ideas of a genius writer. In 1802, Coleridge wrote a letter to William Godwin describing himself by saying:

"In plain & natural English, I am a dreaming & therefore an indolent man. I am a Starling self-incaged, & always in the Mould, & my whole Note is Tomorrow, & tomorrow, & tomorrow" (IBID, 782).

Having believed of a love affair between his wife and his friend William Wordsworth, Coleridge was haunted by "nightmares and irrepressible feelings of primitive jealousy towards Wordsworth for a long time." (Moulin, 2010:35)

The theory of Psychoanalysis examines the dynamics of consciousness development. It was first laid out by Sigmund Freud in the 19th Century. Freud's

theory of psycho-analysis has been very wide-spread. It has invaded the human thinking during the modern age. Roger Webster thinks that Freud's model of the individual psyche, with conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious levels has proved very influential since the inner self of the human being is the region where deepest desires and fears are hidden under the reality of everyday life. (Webster:84) These can be expressed through symbols ,dreams and psychological slips. Freud assimilates the human mind to the iceberg that is structured in a way so that its great density and weight lie beneath the surface level of consciousness (qtd. in Guerin..et al:203).

The human mind, according to Freud's theory, is divided into three psychic zones: the first is called the **id** which functions to fulfill our aggressions and desires including the sexual ones. It gratifies our instincts for pleasure without regard for social and moral conventions or legal restraints. The second psychic zone is called the **ego** that is responsible for governing the sensual drives of the **id**. The **ego** is also known as the reality principle though it lacks the vitality and energy of the preceding zone. It serves as "intermediary between the world within and the world without"(ibid:205).The third zone which is called **superego** is protective as well. It refers to the learned rules and customs and it is also known as the morality principle. It works with the **ego** to control the human behaviour. Freud believes that the balance among these three zones keeps us morally healthy human beings.

Dreams, according to Freud's theory, are means that relieve us from the pressures of our waking mind and life. He defines a dream as "the psychic activity of the sleeper that is stimulated by the deepest sensual desires, ideas and the loathings which fill one's mind"(Young:7). Freud believes that our dreams represent anxiety or repressed thoughts which are mainly sexual. They are only released in dreams because of embarrassment. Dreams help us to understand the unconscious activities of the mind. In every dream there are symbolic images that are either phallic(male)symbols or yonic (female), and can be explained through reductive code. Dreams, in other words, can represent unsatisfied or unfulfilled wishes. A single dream, accordingly, is a wish fulfillment or "a correction of unsatisfying reality."

In his essay "Creative Writers and Daydreaming" (1908), Freud explains that dreams are representations of the unconsciousness. However, he shows his readers that not all repressed desires can be defined in terms of sexuality. They can symbolize different things depending on the dreamer's associations. Human beings have innumerable wishes and desires that cannot be released freely in the consciousness due to cultural boundaries, morality and other social restrictions. These desires remain suppressed in our unconscious level of mind. Freud contends that there are three ways to release them: **Sex, tongue slips and writing**. Artists use their writing to express the repressed desires of their

childhood, memories and different past experiences. It is ego that helps the writers to express the repressed desires in a socially accepted form, not directly but in disguised form.

The writer's choice of subject matter then seems to be dictated by unfulfilled childhood wishes as well as by a "recent provoking occasion"; past and present are projected toward the future through the medium of art. The artist dreams aloud and in public. But what is it that makes for the special pleasure we derive from the artist's depiction of painful or unpleasant events? (Freud, 420, squarespace.com)

Freud argues that creative writers do the same as children at play since both groups create a world out of their imagination and live in it seriously. They invest their worlds with "large amounts of emotion" while separating them sharply from reality. This affinity is preserved through language which is a key factor of creativity in both situations. (ibid:421) Freud applies his theory on literature since he believes that the writings of literary authors are a sort of salvation to their truthful emotions. Their literary output reveals the desires of their unconscious minds. Dr. Richard Dutton affirms that Sigmund Freud acknowledged the authors of the past to be intuitive psychologists by offering insights into their inner selves (Dutton:62). The internal and external worlds of the author are antithetical and they both work together to formulate his literary character.

The psychological analysis of Coleridge's poem "Kublakhan" depends largely on biographical details from the poet's life. Coleridge opens the poem talking about Kublai Khan(1215-1294),the Chinese king who founded the Mongol dynasty. He orders a stately dome to be built: **In Xnanadu did Kublakhan/ A stately pleasure dome decree** (ll.1-2,qtd in Abrams et al:1556). Kublakhan's character symbolizes Coleridge's unendurable torment because of his weakness which led him to live outside the reality of the life that the rest of people live in. Both characters are quite antithetical: The first is highly weak and passive ;whereas the second is completely "powerful and authoritative"(Kharbe:107).

The envious tone is slightly changed at the end of the poem when Coleridge equates himself with the strong and powerful Khan who has decreed a stately pleasure to be built since he himself has created a dome-like poem that will be read and heard over generations. This poem is an attempt to rise above all types of poetry showing Coleridge as an emperor of a great poetic dynasty: **To such s deep delight t'would win me,/That with music loud and long,/I would build that dome in air,....**(ll 44-46). Coleridge tries to rise above the weakness that opium addiction brings to him. He wants to reflect himself as powerful as

Kublakhan and as a man of 'flashing eyes' and 'floating hair' that everyone should cry 'Beware! Beware!'.

The setting of the poem is a remote city called 'Xanadu', symbolizing the poet's inner thoughts and feelings which lie at a remote area in his sub-conscious being. The place is described as paradise. It is synonymous to splendour and prosperity that contradict the turmoil of Coleridge's own life:.....**the sacred river ran/ through caverns measureless to man/ Down to a sunless sea...**(ll3-5).He describes the dome saying as 'blossomed many an incense bearing tree', using the word 'incense' to suggest intoxication out of opium addiction. The dome that contains a fountain which throws rocks into the air and ends in a chasm is an example of phallic imagery that symbolizes the struggle between the poet's **id** and **superego**. He was a man whose mind wavered between a fountain-like ambition and an anguished character that was addicted to opium. His ambition "fell out in a chasm nowhere and elsewhere.

The description of the setting has other images that attribute to the Freudian concept of **id**: 'towers were girdled round', 'forests ancient as hills' and 'A savage place as holy and enchanted' are another examples of phallic imagery that symbolize Coleridge's "wild, untamed passions"(Rivkin&Ryan:46). Other examples of yonic imagery are: 'sunny spots of greenery' which is an indicator of the concept of ego since light symbolizes the principle of morality in the Freudian theory.

Coleridge describes the shadow of the dome as '**floated midway on the waves**'(l:32),which is another example of yonic imagery that resembles the poet's sexual desire which attributes to the concept of **id**. This image reflects his psychological torment because of deprivation of true sensual intoxication. In lines(39-41), Coleridge says:

In a vision once I saw:

It was an Abyssinian maid,

And on her dulcimer she played

Singing of Mount Abora

The image of the woman in these lines symbolizes love that remains out of Coleridge's reach, suggesting sexual desire that is symbolized by the loud and long music of the maiden. It contradicts the other image of the woman who is wailing for her demon lover under a waning moon, since the later suggests issues of seduction and sexual politics at a time when the poet was suffering deep passionate turmoil. The waning moon is an auspicious place to seek the return of her lover.

The images of sexual desire which attribute to the concept of **id** are contradictory with other images that are analogous to the Freudian concept of **superego** like the dome and the dynasty since they symbolize the social and moral order. These opposing images resemble the dramatic projection of Coleridge's psyche reflecting his personal experiences in life. The dream in this poem indicates Freud's opinion who claims that "Dreams aim at relieving us from the pressures of the waking life, the sensual desires and the loathings which fill one's heart"(qtd in Bloom:253).

Coming back to the core of the argument, we want to assert the premise that taking into consideration the theoretical discourse of Roland Barthes in reading Coleridge's poem "Kublakhan" would not help to solve the poem's incomprehensible imagery amidst the complexities of contradiction in it. Both Coleridge and Kublakhan exemplify human creativity. This is well represented in the image of dome creation. The dome in air is an embodiment of the Romantics' theory of imaginative creation which Coleridge embraces but cannot quite completely work out.

Conclusion

Roland Barthes launches a deviation on the traditional biography-based criticism which mostly focuses on the biography of the authors and their intentions to unravel the meaning of the literary text. He contends that the attempt to figure out the author in order to read a text is a fallacy. This study questions Barthes' hypothesis in order to contend authors in many texts are strongly alive especially in texts that are viable to psychoanalysis. "Kublakhan" is a case in point of such works since it is composed in the unconsciousness of the poet.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge described his poem "Kublakhan" as "a psychological curiosity", this is mainly attained throughout the production of unusual images that reflect his sensitivity to natural beauty, the choice of words for their sounds and the use of alliteration. The difficulty of Coleridge's poem "Kublakhan" lies in the fact that its language has symbolic dimensions which bear traces of unconscious desires. The dream in this poem works as a transformer from the unconscious level to the conscious one. The mysterious and exotic world that is referred to in this poem is only a way to understand the distinction between what the dreamer experiences when he dreams and what is being experienced in the analysis of the dream later on. This means the distinction between what happens in the dream during the sleep and the memory that is attained from such an unconscious experience. This fact is illustrated in

the relationship between Coleridge's unconscious desires and their transformation through the dream.

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