



A STUDY OF SYMBOLS AND IMAGERY IN DUKE REDBIRD'S POEM I AM THE REDMAN WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO NORTHROP FRYE'S ANATOMY OF CRITICISM

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Abstract

The study of the vast and rich body of the literature of the native people of Canada has been too long neglected and ignored. Very few literary scholars are familiar with the oral literature that transcends the European concepts of genre, or the written literature that spans a wide range of genres-speeches, letters, sermons, reports, petitions, diary entries, essays, history, journals, autobiography, poetry, short stories, and novels. Native poetry of Canada lagged behind prose in the 1970s. Among the poets who managed to get published their poems were Sarain Stump, Duke Redbird, George Kenny, Rita Joe, Ben Abel, Chief Dan George, and Daniel David Moses. Sarain Stump in his poem *There is My People Sleeping* laments at the loss of the traditional way of life while Duke Redbird in his poem, 'I Am the Redman' lashes out against an insensitive white society which reflects the political turmoil of the period when he was a militant social activist. Penne Petrone in her work *Native Literature in Canada from the Oral Tradition to the Present* has criticized, "In 'I Am the Redman' Redbird's ironic tone and symbolism, derived from an urban and industrialized society, bristle with contempt and pride" (130).

The paper aims to compare the symbols occur in 'I Am the Redman' with the archetypal symbols found in mythology and literature with special reference to the Canadian critic Northrop Frye's, *Anatomy of Criticism*. The significant archetypal symbols found in the poem are the three prime elements of the Earth viz. the earth, water and sky.

Duke Redbird was born in Southampton, Canada, in 1939. He is a Canadian poet, painter, essayist, journalist, activist, businessman, actor and administrator, TV screenplay and film director. He is well known as a prime figure in the progress of First Nations literature in Canada. He is an Ojibwe from Saugeen First Nation in Southwestern Ontario. He was raised by Caucasian foster families. He stated his writing as a way to deal with the anti-aboriginal racism he faced in schools. In the mid-1960s, he started performing as a spoken word artist on folk festival, theatre tours and coffeehouse across Canada. He was a speaker on native rights issues and an active organizer of protests. In an episode of *Adventures in Rainbow Country*, he got his first acting role. *Red on White* is a biography of Redbird published by Marty Dunn, in 1971. His notable published poetry collections are *I Am Canadian* (1978), *Loveshine and Red Wine* (1981), and *We Are Metis*. "Silver River", is a song which Redbird had recorded in 1975 in collaboration with musician Shingoose. It appeared on the 2014 compilation album *Native North America. Vol. I*. Redbird also had served as a vice-president of the Native Council of Canada, in the 1970s. His academic thesis *We Are Metis* was published in 1980, after getting his master's degree in Political Science from the York University. He served as President of the Ontario Metis and Non-Status Indian Association. He had worked in television and film in 1990s. He also worked as an entertainer and aboriginal issues reporter and news producer for *City TV*. In 1990s he took several acting roles, appearing in the films *The Shaman's Source* and *Casino Jack*, and episode of *Wonderfalls* and *Relic Hunter*.

Canadian poems offer a wealth of texts on man's relationships with his natural environment. The Canadian poems' *ethos* is a manifold one: the Great Lakes, the wilderness northern Ontario and Quebe, the vast prairies, the West Coast and the arctic circle. Canadian poets have described nature as benign, peaceful and grandeur. Like the Romantic poets, the Canadian poets too regarded communion with nature as a main source of inspiration, consolation and escape, for example, Wordsworth's Romantic poetry, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." The Canadian landscape poses not only a psychological threat but also life is impossible in the arctic climate of the north. Early immigrants to Canada came for reasons and with hopes comparable to those of their brothers in south. The Canadian settlers felt oppressed by the natural environment more frequently than the U. S. immigrants. The Canadian pioneers did not conquer his country but tried to survive, physically as well as mentally. The psychological dimensions of the Canadian pioneer experience have been exploited in a number of modern poems: one of the best known is Margaret Atwood's *Progressive Insanities of a Pioneero*. 'Man is a minute point in this vast landscape of Canada which he cannot grasp' is the theme of the poem.

The Canadian critic Northrop Frye's critical theory is based upon his doctrine of imagination. His emphasis is on the imagination. It creates culture out of nature and it also produces literary language. He distinguishes three basic modes of perception: sensory perception; the ego-centric perception of the abstract ideas and reflections; the imaginative perception of the world we desire and want to create which is called the world of vision. The third kind of perception is superior to the other two. The material world provides a universal language of images and each man's imagination speaks that language with his own accent. This universality of images enables the poet to transcend time and source. Frye is of the view that the new poem is born into an already existing order of words as the new born baby is a repetition of the already existing species. It is due to the autonomy of literature, a study of a work of art in juxtaposition with other works of literature is possible. The



structural principles of music and painting can be studied with reference to their internal analogies. Similarly, the structural principles of literature are to be derived from archetypal and analogic criticism.

Frye points out that the work of literature moves in time and also is caught by the eye as a whole, making a pattern. Narrative or *mythos* conveys the sense of movement caught by the ear and *dianoia* conveys or preserves the simultaneous pattern or vision caught by the eye. Whenever any simultaneous apprehension is made, we have *dianoia*. This is what is meant as matter and meaning of a work. Matter is the narrative or the organizing principle and meaning is the containing principle. When a work of literature is dealt by a critic, he tries to freeze its movement in time and looks at it as a completed pattern of words, with all its part existing simultaneously. This simultaneity caught by the eye is described as *dianoia*. "The *mythos* is the *dianoia* in movement; the *dianoia* is the *mythos* in stasis. The one reason why we tend to think of literary symbolism solely in terms of meaning is that we have no word for the moving body of imagery in a work of literature" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 83). Formal criticism starts with an imagination of the imagery of a poem, bringing out its distinctive pattern.

While formal criticism concentrates on the study of a poem or a work of literature, archetypal criticism places it among all the works of art and makes a comparative study. While a poem is studied in relation to other poems, as a unit of poetry, symbols are the connecting factors of poems of different nations, ages, and poets. Here comes the view of symbol as an archetype. By archetype Frye means a typical or recurring image. "I mean by an archetype, a symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 99). If the archetypes are communicable symbols, and there is a centre of archetypes, the possibility of the existence of universal symbol is ascertained.

Some symbols are images common to all men, and therefore have a communicable power which is potentially unlimited. Such symbols include those of food and drink, of the quest of journey, of light and darkness, and of sexual fulfillment, which would usually take the form of marriage" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 118).

The archetype of a poem can be studied through literature. Here the poem is the microcosm and the symbol which is the connecting factor between the microcosm and the macrocosm is a monad. Certain common images of physical nature like the sea or the forest in a large number of poems indicate a certain unity in nature that poetry imitates. Symbols are compact images. Symbolism in the full sense provides us with a transcendent embodiment of the meaning. A word, a phrase, or an image used with some kind of special reference (which is what a symbol is usually taken to mean) are all symbols when they are distinguishable elements in critical analysis. Any symbol is an image. For example, the image of Cross is a symbol of Jesus Christ or sacrifice. One may associate white with purity/ peace, or green with 'go' sign in traffic, In Penny Petrone's work, *Native Literature in Canada, From the Oral Tradition to the Present* one can find Duke Redbird's poem "I Am the Redman". In it she has criticized, "In 'I Am the Redman' Redbird's ironic tone and symbolism, derived from an urban and industrialized society, bristle with contempt and pride" (130). The poet has written the poem phenomenally by using symbols and imagery, the two main literary devices of the genre.

I am the Redman
Son of the forest, mountain and lake.
What use have I of asphalt?
What use have I of brick and concrete?
What use have I of the automobile?
Think you these gifts are divine
That I should be humbly grateful? (131)

These first two lines are enriched with powerful symbols and imagery. Red symbolizes immortality. The first book of *The Faerie Queen* represents the closest following of the Biblical quest-romance theme in English literature. It resembles the Bible. Frye has explained the story of the first book of Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*.

In Spenser's account of the quest of St. George, the patron saint of England, the protagonist represents the Christian Church in England, and hence his quest is an imitation of that of Christ. Spenser's Redcross Knight is led by the lady Una (who is veiled in black) to the kingdom of her parents, which is being laid waste by a dragon. The dragon is of somewhat unusual size, at least allegorically. (*Anatomy of Criticism* 194)

It is believed that Una's parents held all the worlds in their control until the dragon lay all their land wasted. Una's parents are the symbolic representation of Adam and Eve (the first man and women on Earth). Their kingdom is the Eden garden or the unfallen world. The dragon is identified with the leviathan, the serpent of Eden, Satan. Here the "Redman" (131) signifies St. George whose mission is to kill the dragon and raise Eden in the wilderness and restore England to the status of Eden. The battle with the dragon lasts for three days at the end of each of the first two days St. George is beaten back and is enhanced first by the water of life, then by the tree of life. The Canadian critic comments on the red and white colour thus, "St.



George's emblem is a red cross on a white ground, which is the flag borne by Christ in traditional iconography when he returns in triumph from the prostrate dragon of hell"(*Anatomy of Criticism* 195). Here the "Redman," the protagonist denotes the Saviour of the fallen land, the rural Canada, which is laid waste by the U.S (materialistic) immigrants, the antagonist. "Hence every typical character ...tends to have his moral opposite confronting him, like black and white pieces in a chess game"(*Anatomy of Criticism* 195).

Forest stands for adventure, and sufferings. The native Canadians survived from the harms of Nature like the freezing cold climate, and deceases. Rama, the protagonist of the Valmiki's *Ramayana* was taken to forest by Viswamithra to conduct the *Yagna* as he was the only person who had the power to demolish the demoness Thataka and her allies who had been preventing the *yagna* from being conducted for the welfare of humanity. By killing them in the forest, Rama helped the sage to conduct the *yagna* successfully. The sage then took Rama through the forests again where the former tells the story of the descent of the river Ganga (water) to the latter. Ganga water is believed to be brought down from high heavens by Bagiratha by his *tapas*/meditation for thousands of years to Lord Shiva. He wished to absolve the sins of his ancestors whose spirits were dangling in the mid-air until it was touched by the water from the River Ganga. R. K. Narayan in his retold work, *The Ramayan* states, "Ganga cleanses and transforms; the dying person with a sip of that water or with the ashes of his bones dissolved therein attains salvation"(*The Ramayana* 17). The poet Duke Redbird symbolically states that he is the son of the River Ganga as Bhishma in *The Mahabharata* who is noted for his individuality. R.K. Narayan makes a contrast between the forest and the city life thus:

Mithila, after all the forests, mountain paths, valleys, and places of solitude and silence through which we have travelled thus far, offers a pleasant change to a city of colour and pleasure, with people enjoying the business of living. The very minute Rama steps into Mithila, he notices golden turrets and domes, and towers, and colourful flags fluttering in the wind as if to welcome the royal bridegroom-to-be. (*The Ramayana* 23)

Duke Redbird he personifies himself as the son of the forest. The poet's father and forefathers had made many adventures and overcome many troubles and tribulations while living in their native rural land and preserved their rural environment by leading a life that had entwined them with nature. But, the White men are urbanizing the rural lands as cities by deforestation and are leading a life of sophistication at the cost of polluting and destroying the serene green environment. Mountain is an apocalyptic imagery. "One important detail in poetic symbolism remains to be considered. This is the symbolic presentation of the point at which the undisplaced apocalyptic world and the cyclical world of nature into alignment, and which we propose to call the point of epiphany. Its most common settings are the mountain-top..."(*Anatomy of Criticism* 203). From the mountain initiates the cyclical order of nature. And this is symbolically represented by the poet that he is the son of the mountain, the preserver of the nature. He answers in an interrogative ironic tone that he has no interest for the pleasures of the city which is symbolized through asphalt advanced high-tech road, brick and concrete buildings, automobiles. Asphalt, the black sticky substance over the road signifies the gloomy black heart of the White men. The poet tells sarcastically that he will not accept these sophistications as holy from the high heaven.

I am the Redman,
Son of the tree, hill and stream,
What use have I of china and crystal?
What use have I of diamonds and gold?
What use have I of money?
Think you these from heaven sent,
That I should be eager to accept? (131).

As a tree's root is fixed to the soil firmly, the poet's tree of life too is deeply rooted to his native soil. The tree stands for 'individuality.' Like his parents who were independent in their soil the poet too wishes to live independently in his ancestor's land. Like the hill which stands steadily, he too is strong, unmindful of the White people's wealth and their oppression over them. He states that he has no use of money as he acquires all the basic necessities of life from his traditional culture of agriculture. So he declines their offer saying that he won't accept these as gifts from heaven.

I am the Redman,
Son of the earth and water and sky.
What use have I of silk and velvet?
What use have I of nylon and plastic?
What use have I of your religion?
Think you these holy and sacred
That I should kneel in awe?(131).



“Son of the earth...” is analogous to the imagery of daughter of the earth Sita portrayed in the great Indian epic the *Ramayana*. Earth stands for tolerance and acceptance like one’s mother. Generally Indians refer their country as ‘Bharath Matha’ which means ‘Mother India’. Indians consider honouring their native land as equal to honouring their mother and that’s why they refer their country as “mother land”. The earth, water and sky are the prime elements of the earth which is a monad projecting the water cycle imagery that symbolizes the birth of an *avatar*/ incarnation of God. “Water–symbolism has also its own cycle, from rains to springs, from springs and fountains to brooks and rivers, from rivers to the sea or the winter snow, and back again” (*Anatomy of Criticism* 160). In the chapter, “Theory of Mythos: Introduction” Frye states that there is a symbolic intent in portraying the cyclical world of nature, i.e., to project the birth, death and (rebirth) reincarnation of mythical heroes.

The fundamental form of process is cyclical movement, the alternation of success and decline, effort and repose, life and death which is the rhythm of process... In the divine world the central process or movement is that of the death and rebirth, or the disappearance and return, or the incarnation and withdrawal, of a god. This divine activity is usually identified or associated with one or more of the cyclical processes of nature. (*Anatomy of Criticism* 158)

As stated above by Northrop Frye, in the very beginning of the story of *The Ramayana*, R. K. Narayan symbolically tells the birth of Rama, that he is related to the apocalyptic world, with the depiction of the cyclical world of nature i.e., with the water cycle imagery. He portrays the river Sarayu, the white fleecy clouds drifting across the sky towards the sea (as rain), and then the evaporation of water as dark water-laden clouds to the mountain-tops, then again condensation, and at last the flow of water again as rain down in the streams. At this point comes the alignment of the undisplaced apocalyptic world and the cyclical world of nature and this is the point of epiphany. Here is the connection with Rama, the supreme lord Vishnu’s incarnation into the human world of birth and death and whose mission in life is to root out the *rakshasas*, the demonic persons from the face of the earth and sustain *dharma* /righteousness again, which emanates from the collective unconsciousness of the good souls. Thus the descent and ascent of Vishnu is given in the water cycle imagery. R. K. Narayan says:

In keeping with the classical tradition, Kamban begins his epic with a description of the land in which the story is set. The first stanza mentions the river Sarayu, which flows through the country of Kosala. The second stanza lifts your vision skyward to observe the white fleecy clouds that drift across the sky towards the sea, and later return in dark water-laden masses to the mountain-tops, where they condense and flow down the slopes in streams scouring the mountainsides of its treasures of minerals and essences ...The river descends with a load of merchandise such as precious stones, sandalwood, peacock feathers, and iridescent flower petals and pollen grains, carrying it through the mountains, forests, valleys, and plains of Kosala country, and, after evenly distributing the gifts, ends its carrier in the sea. (*The Ramayana* 3)

Duke Redbird symbolically mentions that he too is a reincarnation of mythical hero who came in human form to save his native Canada and its people from the oppression and ruin of the White men. So he uses the water cycle imagery to project his birth’s ultimate purpose. So he says that he will not consider the foreign persons’ materials as holy or sacred and will not bend for them and their policies.

I am the Redman
I look at you White Brother
And I ask you:
Save not me from sin and evil,
Save yourself. (131)

As the poet consider himself as the Saviour who came to destroy the demons, he looks down upon the White men and asserts in ironic tone not to save him rather to save themselves from their sins and evils. This poem is nearer to mythology where one can find the apocalyptic “heaven” and the demonic “evil.” Northrop Frye defines the apocalyptic and the demonic imagery thus:

We have, then three organizations of myths and archetypal symbols in literature. First, there is undisplaced myth, generally concerned with gods or demons, and which takes the form of two contrasting worlds of total metaphorical identification, one desirable and the other undesirable. These worlds are often identified with the existential heavens and hells of the religious contemporary with such literature. These two forms of metaphorical organization we call the apocalyptic and the demonic respectively. (*Anatomy of Criticism* 139)

Thus Duke Redbird’s poem *I Am the Redman* is full of archetypal (apocalyptic and demonic) imagery. Here the poem is the microcosm and the symbol which is the connecting factor between the microcosm and the macrocosm is a monad.



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