

The Postmodern Creative Process and De(con)struction of the Muse

Abstract

Art and artistic creation have always been a topic for discussion. Various theories have been proposed about the process of artistic creation since the ancient times to the postmodern era. Various factors like divine inspiration, socio – cultural and political contexts and the artist's imagination and the unconscious have been considered as influential in shaping the creative process and the production of art. This paper through an analysis of the poem 'The Thought-Fox' tries to understand the postmodern creative process.

Keywords: Creative Process, Creativity, Originality, Imagination, Unconscious, Postmodernism.

Introduction

The nature of art and the process of its creation have always been a matter of concern and contention among scholars beginning from ancient Greece. Related to this, the role, degree of involvement and the genius/creativity of the author have also been much discussed. Plato in his iconic book *Ion* talks about the "divine frenzy" (Selden 1988:150), seized by which the artist creates. Longinus, in a similar vein, proposes the "ideas of natural ability in writers which go beyond mere technical skill" (150). In the eighteenth century with the growing influence of the Enlightenment, creativity became more rule-governed. Artistic imagination was controlled by the arguments of reason and emphasis was shifted to propriety of expression. During the Romantic age 'originality' gained paramount significance and art was a product of recollection tempered with imagination and a feat achieved in tranquility. Heavily influenced by Freudian theories, the modern age considered art as an expression of the author's unconscious. The locus of creativity was rooted in mysterious forces of the unconscious mind which were beyond the writer's control. The artist exerted its power only in the expression of these forces. Other theoretical approaches like Marxism and Structuralism argued for the importance of the social, political, cultural and economic structures which are influential in the process of creation. Gaining momentum in the 1970s, Postmodernism as a movement created radical shifts in approaches towards art and artistic creation. Earlier theories argued that art has an origin point, be it in the divine, the author or the various structures of which the author is a part. Postmodernism, on the contrary, argued that there is no one origin point and therefore there is no originality in art.

Aim of the Study

This paper seeks to arrive at a theory of the postmodern creative process through an analysis of Ted Hughes' poem 'The Thought-Fox'. Ted Hughes is widely known for his extensive use of animals and animal imagery in his poems. Animals appear in his poems not only as objects but also as active and powerful subjects. Much attention has already been given to the notion of creativity presented in this poem. Bibhu Padhi in his essay titled 'Ted Hughes's 'The Thought-Fox': Object, Symbol, and Creativity' focuses on the animalistic nature of Ted Hughes's poetry. Citing an interview of Hughes, Padhi says that Hughes "compares the act of writing poetry with the act of capturing animals" (2014:86). He further adds that for Hughes the poem itself is similar to an animal – "it is as much pure instinct as an animal, and as involuntary and inspired in its action as an animal" (86). V. Madhukumar in his essay 'Ted Hughes's Poetry – The Problem of the Evil of Self – Consciousness' looks at the animal imagery as an indication of the instinctual nature of artistic response (2011:396). In a different vein, the present paper argues that the animal imagery in the poem functions in a much more vital way than just highlight the aggressive or instinctual nature of creativity. In keeping with the postmodern philosophy, the poem under consideration subverts various metanarratives

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and indicates a creative process which is quite different from the traditional ones.

Linda Hutcheon states that postmodern art is the "mimesis of process" (qtd. in Niama&Sabeeh: 1170) rather than the imitation of the product. It elaborates more on how art is created rather than the artistic product itself. Thus Hughes's poem 'The Thought - Fox' can neatly be categorized as a postmodern poem. It is a poem about writing a poem. The poem begins with a conscious assertion of agency in the process of creation:

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:

The speaker or the poetic persona conjures up an image of the forest. The forest could either be a real forest or an imagined one. The phrase 'midnight moment's forest' could signify various ideas. Either the speaker looks at the forest at a moment in midnight or the moment itself is like a forest – a forest of thoughts. Forests symbolize a "labyrinthine" (Ferber 1999:109) space which cannot be easily sorted out. The metaphor of the labyrinth has been usually used to describe postmodern texts. According to Morrison, labyrinths indicate "ambiguity and disorientation" and these are the chief concerns of postmodernism. When the speaker is introduced to us, s/he is disoriented and lost in the labyrinthine forest of thoughts. The emergence of the fox (which could symbolize the creative inspiration or the poem itself) from the labyrinth marks the successful completion of the poem.

Another postmodern element is the absence of origins (Butler 2002:23). If the fox is understood as the creative force or inspiration, its origin cannot be traced to any specific point. In case of Aristotle's concept of imitation and Wordsworth's process of recollection, the origin of the creative inspiration was clear, even though poetic creation involved a reshaping of that idea. In the present poem there is no clarity as to where the idea originates. In postmodernism, the author is not considered as the originator of the text. This is revealed through the inability of the poetic persona or the narrator to control the narrative. In John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the narrator shows how it also becomes a part of the narrative itself and then is reduced to a mere witness to the actions of the characters whom it cannot control anymore. Something similar happens in 'The Thought - Fox' also. The poetic persona just sits calmly and witnesses the movement of the fox. This creative force in the form of the fox does not originate in the speaker rather "It enters the dark hole of the head", probably from somewhere else. If the dark forest, from which the fox emerges, is considered to be the poet's unconscious, then the transition is from the unconscious to the conscious mind where the idea is understood and translated into poetry. Even then the source of the poem remains dubious. It is difficult to decide whether the unconscious or the conscious is the source of origin.

The climactic moment of the poem creates what Derrida refers to as *aporia*. There is no clear indication of who wrote the poem. It is indicated by the

passive construction of the sentence which lacks any agent of the action:

The page was printed.

This again refers to the postmodern argument that the writer is not the nucleus of the text.

According to Joseph Gemin, "widespread fragmentation...permeates all the various manifestations of an impending age of postmodernity"(1999:48). The speaker beholds the inspiration/fox in fragments – first the "nose" and the "Two eyes". The readers don't see the unified body of the fox at any point in the poem.

Postmodernism dismantles the master narratives which legitimize various discourses. These narratives create "conceptual oppositions" (Butler 2002:20) which are used to methodize discourses. These oppositions also favor or privilege one category over the other. Enlightenment philosophy created the binaries of human/animal, civilization/nature, rational/instinctual, etc. and in each case the former is placed above the latter. The present poem dismantles the metanarrative of Enlightenment. In the poem we see that the human with its rationality is not able to do much other than sitting in the "loneliness" with the "blank page". It is nature (represented in the form of the wilderness of the forest) which provides the creative force (in the form of an animal, the fox) which moves instinctively:

Warily a lame

Shadow lags by stump.

The animal predominates the poem whereas the human is shifted to the margins. The language of the poem invests power in the fox. It is described as "bold", walking:

Brilliantly, concentratedly,

Coming about its own business.

According to Butler "Reason is itself is a system of control". Once anything is rationalized, the comprehension of it becomes easy. Knowledge leads to control. The animal in the poem does not offer itself for complete comprehension by the speaker. It is referred to as "Something" in the poem. It is shrouded in darkness and the speaker is able to see it only in parts. The recognition of the various parts of the fox and the attempt to describe its movement indicate the inadequate attempts of the speaker to be creative. According to Michael H. Mitias, an "artist is creative in as much as he succeeds in organizing a medium that would lead to the emergence of the finest possible aesthetic qualities" (1982:101). The speaker's creativity is limited to the vague attempts of imposing an order over the mysterious and dark inspirational material that he encounters. In performing this act the speaker becomes what Roland Barthes refers to as "scriptor" (4) who just collects and combines the various ideas that are available to him/her. The poet synthesizes the sensory inputs that he receives from various sources – auditory ("the clock ticks"), visual (the image of the fox arriving), tactile ("A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;"), olfactory ("...sharp hot stink of fox") - and weaves a network of relations. Ganguin is of the opinion that the "artist is not born all in one piece. It is much, if he adds a new link in the chain. Ideas are like dreams. A more or less formed

assemblage of hinted things or thoughts. Indeed, does one know whence they come?" (qtd. in Portnoy 1950:25).

The poem also questions the competence of language in conveying meaning – a feature which postmodernism is also concerned with. The poem is primarily image based in the sense that the speaker does not speak about the process of writing a poem rather shows it through the image of the fox. It is the image of the fox which predominates in the poem. In this context Julia Kristeva's analysis of the semiotic and the symbolic aspect of language would be very pertinent. Kristeva differentiates between two aspects of language which are interdependent in nature – the semiotic aspect which deals with the "speaker's inner drives and impulses" and the symbolic aspect which refers to the "rule-governed aspect of language" (Sadahi2012:1491). In the poem it is the image which gets foregrounded over the syntax. The sentences in the poem are loosely organized and lack the tightly knit structure of formal language, especially the lines which describe the movement of the fox. These lines are broken into small phrases and there is repetition:

*Two eyes serve a movement, that now
And again now, and now, and now*

The speaker does not privilege the symbolic aspect of language because it would have been an inappropriate medium to capture the dark creative forces of the unconscious.

Creativity and the Muse

The fox in a way can also be considered as the muse of the poet. Muses have been considered the inspiration behind poetic creation since ages. The muses are usually goddesses who guide the poet in his art. Hughes's keeps the original tradition of the muse intact. According to Alissa Michelle Cook, muses "appear to vanish in the manner common to their elusive nature. They are always acknowledged but rarely involved in the direct events of the story" (2013:9). 'The Thought – fox' can be looked upon as a poem which describes the encounter between the artist and its muse. The muse in this poem appears only to vanish. In the Celtic tradition, the fox is symbolic of the guide who knows the forest extremely precisely. In the earlier tradition, the creative inspiration was assumed to be bestowed by the divine and therefore the goddess (muse) was a representative of it. In the postmodern era where the obscure and shady unconscious provides the repertoire of creative energy, the fox becomes the desired guide. In Dante's *Purgatorio*, the fox was a symbol of "heresy" (Ferber 1999:123). In the present poem the fox represents a primordial state of life before religion. It is a being of the dark and has association with evil (symbolized by the forest). Therefore it can be considered as heretic in nature.

Conclusion

The poem changes the perception of art. Art in the postmodern context is not imitation, recollection, representation, imagination or an expression of the poet's subjective feelings or repressed desires. It is an attempt at collecting the various sense impressions that the artist receives from various sources. It is a process not a

product. The Postmodern creative process is a labyrinthine evolution of ideas received from untraceable sources. The postmodern creative process is in a way eclectic, semiotic and at times could possibly be heretic.

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