

BIBLE AS THE GREAT CODE OF LITERATURE: A PERSPECTIVE IN NORTHROP FRYE’S THEORY

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The present study concentrates specifically upon the role of the Bible in literature viewed by Northrop Frye. Frye’s analysis of the same in *Fearful Symmetry*, *Anatomy of Criticism*, *The Great Code*, and the latest *Words with Power*, itself is voluminous, and therefore, the present study has tried to epitomize all those things, which Frye has said on a large scale. Frye treats the Bible as a humanist theology to validate the Christian concepts of life and means of life.

Structuralist too attempted the validation of meaning in diachronic and synchronic contexts but could not place the ‘meaning’ in the total order of ‘logos’ as Northrop Frye attempted. Structuralists who originated from the close scrutiny of text as practiced by the new critics started widening the reach of interpretation in terms of setting, locale and its archetypal antecedents but could not organize their postulations in a coherent order of history and civilization that in fact shape the meaning. Archetypes are not out of present rather they float in the present traversing through their journey from the past. That the past connects to present and present with future brings out a prophetic revelation in the perpetuation of art itself and therefore to have a composite point of view of work in totality was a natural choice for a comprehensive and humanist critic like Northrop Frye.

This is why Northrop Frye purposefully calls himself a schematic thinker with a humanistic approach that considers in creation and its creator as part and whole. In *Anatomy of criticism* he writes that what literature and literary criticism need is a conceptual framework (page 6)ⁱ. Concepts are schematic because they are designed to achieve a conceived meaning and their being systematic is more mechanical than imaginative. The works of art, according to Frye, have a prophetic character, in the sense that they become operative in a cultural, social religious and pre-eminently a literary universe, which are directly and indirectly shaped by the Great Code, which is undoubtedly the Bible. Blake calls Bible, the ‘Great Code’ of all arts; the Bible has a prophetic design; the clearest evidence to this is that it has proper beginning, the intended wish, suppression of the wish, and lastly the happy end with wish fulfillment. The two extreme poles: the Genesis and the Revelation schematize the whole design of the biblical events. In the Genesis man loses the paradise, the tree of life and the water of life; and in Revelation 21,22 man is restored to the Edenic paradise with the tree of life and the water of life. We will see that this wishfulfilment shapes nothing else than the structure of comedy and romance, and the Bible, thus, in Dante’s words is a ‘divine comedy’.

The western logos is by and large Bible centric or centred around the classical literature of Greek and Latin. That the Bible, being the shaping principle of literature, is the shaping principle of Frye’s theoretical corpus as well, can be seen in Frye’s own confessions ‘In a sense all my critical work, beginning with a study of Blake published in 1947, and formulated ten years

later in *Anatomy of Criticism*, has revolved around the Bible (*GC*, xiv)ⁱⁱ. In *Anatomy of Criticism* (14) he writes: ‘Western literature has been more influenced by the Bible than by any other book’. The Bible gives literature, Frye points out in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, its language (rhetoric), myth (narrative), metaphor (imagery), and typology (phases of revelation).

The whole of theoretical postulate of Frye, to mention specifically his seminal books, *Fearful Symmetry: A study of William Blake* (1947), and *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) is conceptualized around this informative structure of the Bible. For example, the Four Essays in *Anatomy* follow up the narrative, symbols, rhetoric and revelations of the Bible in the wish fulfilment pattern. In the *Theory of Modes*, the five categories from top to bottom, the ironic mode, low-mimetic, high-mimetic, romantic and the Mythical mode; in the *Theory of Symbols*, the descriptive, literal, formal, archetypal and the anagogic symbols; in the *Theory of Myths*, the *mythos* of winter, autumn, spring and summer; and in *Theory of Genres*, episodic and encyclopaedic genres carry out the biblical plan from Fall to Redemption. The Movement from top to bottom in each would inform the tragic modes, myths, symbols and genres.

In William Blake, the biblical universe has been viewed in a four fold universe which Blake calls Ulro (hell), Generation (earth) Beulah (the intermediate land between heaven and earth) and Eden (paradise). The four literary categories identical with them are irony & satire, tragedy, romance and comedy respectively. Besides Blake, J.G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* which centers around the vegetation myth of birth-death-and rebirth of the vegetation god; Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* which views the western civilization in terms of birth-maturity and fall; and Vico who finds three ages in a cycle of history; ‘a mythical age or age of gods, a heroic age or age of an aristocracy, and an age of the people, after which there comes a ricorso or return...(*GC*, 5)’, echo the biblical narratology, and influence Northrop Frye. On such mega-enterprises, Frye builds up a ‘coherent and comprehensive theory of literature’ (*AC*, 11).

To the question of legitimacy of reading the Bible in literary terms, Frye answers: ‘a literary approach to the Bible is not in itself illegitimate; because a book like the Bible which has informed a large galaxy of literature, can not inform as such, if it itself doesn’t have literariness (*GC*, xvi). This literariness is not limited to the Bible only, rather any sacred book ‘is normally written with at least the concentration of poetry’ e.g. Koran, the topographical structure of which has shaped all Islamic literature. Further the Bible is not simply a poem; Frye says that ‘the Bible taken as a poem is so spectacularly a bad a poem that to accept it all as poetry would raise more questions than it solves (*GC*, 47). It is in fact “More” than a work at literature (*GC* xvi); more in the sense that a large portion of the Bible which are not poetical, are political social, philosophical, historical and all other things which a society is concerned to know. They all are functional aspects of society and therefore indirectly the functional aspects of literature as well.

ⁱ Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

ⁱⁱ Frye, Northrop. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.