



EXPLICATION OF MYTHICAL UNDERTONES IN GARY SNYDER'S *MYTHS AND TEXTS*

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Abstract:

Snyder, along with his dedication towards ecology, he was fascinated by mythology. The volume of poetry *Myths and Texts* (1960) is an earlier collection where he says that myth is something that places people in a cultural and physical context and gives them a sense of presence in place and time. According to Snyder it is the duty of a mytho-poet to constantly reenergise the stories that talk about our origin of our history. It also gives us an idea about ourselves and our past. In this sense it becomes a social endeavour and a creation of a novel social mythology. This collection is in the form of three sections based on our culture and weaknesses. Snyder talks about two different human knowledge, symbols (myths) and sense impressions (texts). In *Myths and Texts*, he tries to project the destruction of American nature with reference to the greed of the public. In the section, Logging, he speaks about his own experiences as logger. The section Hunting, is based on the ascetic life of Indian tribes and his deep respect for such a life is clear through his descriptions of myths and tradition of the hunters. The third section, Burning speaks about the Buddhist principle of self-awareness. His interest in Buddhism, Hindu myths and Indian traditions coupled with his own life experiences form the major crux of the collection.

Index Terms: Myths, Anthropocentrism, inter-being, ancient tradition, deforestation, optimism, revival, shamanism, Buddhist ideologies.

The myths and legends, which Plato proposed as the ideal educational material for his young citizens, can be seen as large-scale negotiations between the powers of the inner world and the stubborn conditions of the outer world, under which ordinary men and women have to live. They are immense and at the same time highly detailed sketches for the possibilities of understanding and reconciling the two. They are, in other words, an archive of draft plans for the imagination. Plato is of the opinion that, all big stories, big and small are relevant and if a tale can last, in oral tradition, for two or three generations, then it has either come from the real place, or it has found its way there. And these small tales are just vigorous educational devises as the big myths. (Lane, Only Connect 78).

Gary Snyder holds the most archaic or primitive values on earth. According to Snyder, the term archaic means primal or original. A primordial image from which other forms can emerge or that can be changed or altered. Gary Snyder is interested in learning past cultures and traditions and from his own private experiences. Snyder gave respect to land as it provides sustenance. He was an ardent admirer of all the sentient beings and the animalistic instincts of human beings. He recognizes the necessity of the artist to develop a resisting power to fight against the social pressures and it will help him to understand himself. As an artist he acknowledges the participation in the community rituals and individual

understanding of the subconscious mind. As a common man one should be able to accept his body and senses- the physical capabilities, pleasures, and demands of the skin, and a feeling for the shared labour of the community. Snyder feels that a poet cannot become a complete artist without the understanding of the vast complex relations in nature. The awareness of the local, the bioregional, and the earthly as connected in a chain of interdependence by the judicious sharing of natural resources. By nurturing all these values in mind, Snyder defines an ethical life as a life that is mindful, mannerly and with a unique style. This attitude is necessary for the completion of a real work. In his vision, the fertility of the soil is useless if it is barren or without cultivation. His poems are explicit with the rhythms of manual labour that he does and he lives in the present. This creates music in his head that is responsible for the creation of a work.

Snyder, along with his dedication towards ecology, he was fascinated by mythology. The volume of poetry *Myths and Texts* (1960) is an earlier collection where he says that myth is something that places people in a cultural and physical context and gives them a sense of presence in place and time. According to Snyder it is the duty of a mytho-poet to constantly reenergise the stories that talk about our origin of our history. It also gives us an idea about ourselves and our past. In this sense it becomes a social endeavour and a creation of a novel social mythology. This collection is in the form of three sections based on our culture and weaknesses. Snyder talks about two different human knowledge, symbols (myths) and sense impressions (texts). In *Myths and Texts*, he tries to project the destruction of American nature with reference to the greed of the public. In the section, Logging, he speaks about his own experiences as logger. The section Hunting, is based on the ascetic life of Indian tribes and his deep respect for such a life is clear through his descriptions of myths and tradition of the hunters. The third section, Burning speaks about the Buddhist principle of self-awareness. His interest in Buddhism, Hindu myths and Indian traditions coupled with his own life experiences form the major crux of the collection.

In the epigraph of this collection, we can see Snyder criticising the tradition of Christianity that gives more power to humans by despising the worship of Diana, the goddess of moon and woods. He feels that the biblical rule of man ruling the world is the real beginning of the human tragedy. Instead of considering himself as a part of nature, he is misusing it for his own benefit. Snyder, in his *Myths and Texts*, has criticised the western concept of man-centredness and the logged landscapes of China is the result of such anthropocentrism. This anthropocentrism and the negligence of the natural world with its nuances is the root cause of all kinds of natural calamities. Through this collection of poetry, he tries to educate the public and to exhort them to create a new ethic where they dwell in harmony with nature. This ideal is the ideal of interbeing.

The "Logging" part begins with a very prophetic prologue, glorifying the advent of spring and the ancient roots of humanity. In the first poem of the section, Snyder speaks about a morning star as not the star. This actually is a symbol of awakened mind or enlightenment in a world filled with greed and ego. In the next few lines, we can see the planting of the saplings of two fir trees with an indication of May Queen ceremonies of the spring season. There is also a mention of the rites of Io, the lover of Zeus, that indicates the divine can enter into the human habitats. The introduction of mythical characters in poems is to make the readers aware of our ancient culture and tradition that is disowned by the present generation. Snyder believes that the divinity of the past can act as a guiding force to overcome the present havocs that we are facing today. We cannot restrain ourselves from accepting the past.

Many poems in the section are devoted to deforestation. The trees are given abstract identities and the tortures inflicted upon the working-class people is also presented. The working class identified as Wobblies, were tortured, beaten, and murdered for raising their protest. In poem 10, we can see the image of a weary logger wandering in the woods which gives an indication that logging destructs the non-human world also. In poem 8, Snyder is referring to the mashed bushes that make strange smells. There are also signs of optimism in this section. He speaks of an abandoned overworked farm, where the fir trees began to grow again. In poem 3, he speaks about the cones of pine trees that are capable of withstanding forest fires and can germinate later. In poem 6, he tells of this father who went for berry picking in Washington back in 1914. The region was logged out, but fine black berries started growing between the stumps. Snyder was interested in the life of a common man and he while working as a logger in Yosemite had intimate connection with the laymen and their hard work.

All sections in *Myths and Texts* concludes with a note of change and revival. An apocalyptic vision is presented in poem 15, in which the destructive vision is portrayed. Snyder has borrowed the mythical images from Indian lores and Hinduism. He speaks of the different cycles or kalpas. The cycle ends with the destruction of the world through the fire of Lord Shiva. The "men who hire men to cut groves/ kill snakes, build cities, pave fields" will be swept away by this fire. The myths tells that the torrential rain will put an end to this wild fire leading to re-manifestation. The world is waiting for the rebirth of gods

and man. This shows the interest of Gary Snyder in Indian myths and mythical characters in Hindu puranas.

The "Hunting" section, the life and attitudes of the hunting tribes of North America are explored in order to understand the relationship with nature and man. The hunter believes that their prey has got a divine entity and he readies himself for his work by practicing abstinence from sex, observing fast and prayers to the hunted animal. After hunting the animal, the willingness of the animal is secured and is sacrificed for the benefit of human beings. And after killing the animal, the sin is expiated through prayers and rituals. All the body parts of the hunted animal would be used without wasting. In poem 5, we can see the manufacturing of a spoon from the horn of a goat. Here, we can see the reverence that is shown by Snyder towards all forms of life.

In this section more primacy is given to the bear and deer. In poem 8, he conjoins his knowledge of bears with the folk lores of various cultures. The poem talks about the bear marriage lores common in various communities. A girl who has gone to pluck the berries in the forest was abducted by a tall dark man, who was a combination of animal, deity and human being. Later on, her brother murders him. While doing it, the brother summons the snared bear and sings the bear's death song. This bear myth or bear ceremonialism comes in American Indian mythology. In poem 8, Snyder speaks of a deer that is paralyzed by the headlights of the hunters who shoots them at the end. Two Indian songs are introduced that expresses the respect that is maintained by the hunter for the deer and the willingness of the hunter to have sea water as a penance for the sin he has committed.

The above presentation of folklores and myths reaffirms the interest of Gary Snyder in the oral tradition of narration that is central to most of his poetic collections. Shamanism plays a central role in this collection; shaman is a person who has got a very important social role in the modern society. A shaman is a visionary who conducts dream journeys to find supernatural aid in curing and finding food sources. The "Hunting" section consist of shaman songs that explicates the journey of the healing man to seek powers for healing his sick countrymen. The poem 11, titled as "Songs for a Four -Crowned Dancing Hat", is actually a shamanistic myth extracted from a story "Big Tail", that was included in *Haida Texts and Myths* by John Swanton. This story has a shaman character with the same name Big Tail, and he goes deep into the recesses of the ocean for meeting a supernatural character. He-at-whose-voice-the-Ravens-sit-on-the-sea and to gain a magic hat for saving his people from famine. This poem indirectly suggests the myth in Hindu stories about Prajapati, who created the whole earth and Lord Vishnu took the shape of a boar to hold earth from the depths of the sea. The poem suggests the theme of redemption and Lord Vishnu is considered as akin to Bodhisattva, the protector in Mahayana Buddhism. There is a scene in the poem where the little fern women of the Big Tail story ask about human beings. What will you do with human beings? Are you going to save the human beings? These questions raised by the natural entities show that human life is an inexplicable part of nature and according to shamanism, the forces of nature will work for the welfare of human beings. In poem 12, Snyder speaks about his own experience of picking a wild apple from the vicinity of a hornet's nest. He was able to get the smell of the mountains on him because of his life connected with nature.

The section "Hunting", ends with an apocalyptic note that envisions a universe where creatures are living in harmony. The last poem in this section ends with the following line. "How rare to be born a human being!". The humanity has ample opportunities for enlightening themselves. Snyder's ideal universe is a place where man and beast live harmoniously and it echoes the biblical lines in which the lion is lying down with lamb. In his view, both the man and animal are elements of compassion, as they nurture and cultivate the nature of Buddha.

The "Burning" section, Snyder explores the Buddhist view of life. The beginning of the section talks about the fire that is capable of transforming ourselves. As per the Buddhist principles, the reason for suffering is greed and selfishness. When this ego is burned, a state of enlightenment occurs. This section gives light to the practice of meditation and the result achieved in the process is enlightenment. In many of the poems we can see the poet coming to realisation of his existence through meditation. The practitioner becomes aware of his emptiness or void. This void has a positive connotation in Buddhism, as one of the three doors of liberation. The realisation that existence itself is avoid marks the level of enlightenment. The understanding that nothing is permanent is the very crux of this practice.

In the Buddhist philosophy, the enlightened people who refuse to accept nirvana are called Bodhisattvas. They live for the welfare of the whole community. Snyder has introduced some bodhisattvas from Mahayana Buddhism in his poems. The Maitreya, the future Buddha; the Maudagalyayana, who went to hell for saving his mother; and Amitabha, the Buddha of infinite light. Some poems in this section are devoted to sexual love as it is the symbol of self-transcendence. Transcending the human-centric (ego-bounded) perspective is one of the great strengths of Buddha's

interdependent or interconnected vision of all things within the natural-human-social matrix. (Palmer, FGTE 5). At the culmination of *Myths and Texts*, Snyder declares that “The sun is but a morning star”. We can arouse the nature of Buddha in our own self and can become a transformed individual with the understanding of this insight. In an article, titled “Saint Francis of Assisi”, by Andrew Linzey and Ara Barsam, say about Assisi in the following words: When (St. Francis) considered the primordial source of all things, he was filled with even more abundant piety, calling creatures no matter how small, by the name of brother and sister because he knew they had the same source as himself. (Palmer, FGTE 22). We can see the same ideology in Snyder, when he pays allegiance to all forms of life and non-living things in *Turtle Island*. Snyder’s interest in mythology and his representations of mythical elements in his collections of poetry is noteworthy.

To conclude, the mythical connections in this collection is really evident from the title of the poetry itself. Snyder had excelled in introducing varied mythical elements from different spheres of ancient culture and tradition and certainly this anthology is an eye-opener for all the present-day enthusiasts who is aware of the destruction caused by man on nature. It also enlightens the public about the dire need of saving earth or the whole universe from wanton deastructions.

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