



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

Analysis of the poem “To the Nightingale” by Jorge Luis Borges with reference to “Tradition and Individual Talent” by T.S. Eliot.

Krishan Kumar D. Joshi

Dept. of English and CLS,

Saurashtra University,

VIDHYAYANA

Rajkot.



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

Abstract

“He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same.” (Eliot, Tradition and the Individual Talent) a known essay by T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” focuses on two major aspects for a good poetry and for a poet. One among them is tradition, where a good poet is a well-read person and understands his/her duty in relation to the past of literature and of his predecessors; the other aspect is the concept of impersonalisation where he does not adhere to any preferred period or poet and makes his own position. “Nightingale” is a bird on which many poets from Virgil to Keats and Jorge Luis Borges have attempted their pen. After many beautiful poems written already on Nightingale, Borges thinks to write about it and feels perplexed as the bird has been nicely depicted by canonical poets. How would Borges make his position as poet when he is to write on Nightingale?

Key-words: Tradition, Individual Talent, Impersonalisation,



VIDHYAYANA

Introduction

The paper is divided into two parts. The first is the brief and chief concepts encapsulated in an essay by T.S. Eliot “Tradition and the Individual Talent” which are to be observed while analysing the poem by Jorge Luis Borges titled as “To the Nightingale”. The second part would be the analysis of the poem with reference to the key concepts as thought by T.S. Eliot in his above-mentioned essay. These concepts, as known, should be the attributes of any good poets.

Jorge Luis Borges, an Argentine Short- story writer, essayist, translator and poet is mainly known for his short stories and fictions but he preferred himself to be called a poet. As his eyesight waned, he focused on poetry more. He was deeply interested in the elements of mythology and theology which he nicely knits into his poems. He wrote a poem “To the Nightingale” where one can observe his extensive reading of mythologies and theologies. Nightingale is a common bird known for her voice. Nightingale sings both the time, during day and during night. But her voice is observed joyous during the day and sorrowful in the night by poets. Nightingale has been credited with the numerous names by many poets. Some have found it



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

for the joy where the other have found it mournful. One can find references of the bird in the writings of Virgil, Shakespeare and Keats to name a few. And in the theology of Muslims, Persians, Christians and in enigmas as well. What more and new can be attributed to the bird nightingale after such great attempts is a problem for Borges. How can he differ in the depiction of the bird and its voice is the problem of a poet? Any poet who wishes to make his unique and individual position into the order of literature that exist before him is what bothers to Borges. While his attempt to write about the bird after reading many such attempts, Borges feels Poetic block, and this feeling is what makes a good poem of his own "To the Nightingale". By an attempt, Borges not only shows his confusion in writing but at the same time also reveals his vast reading. With this attempt, he also tries to set his own position as a poet in the list.

T.S. Eliot is a name which one can not oversee while talking of criticism or of the great authors. His essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is one of the good essays in the list of criticism. In the essay Eliot talks about the Characteristics of a good writer and a good piece of work. The essay is divided into three parts as introduction of what he means by "Tradition", the second is the concept of Impersonalisation and the third is conclusion. It is task of this paper to see Borges poem "To the Nightingale" with the aspects of a good poet as discussed by T.S. Eliot in his essay.

By "Tradition" Eliot means that any writer must be aware of his past and his predecessors. His past and predecessors means not his own but of the genre or a field of literature in which he wishes to contribute. A poet who is to write in his time must know his present and his past. According to Eliot, to know the tradition of the literature cannot be attained in inheritance but it is a matter of great labour. Further he enforces the knowledge of past having read is not a mere information but while reading it one must have a sense of past. When a poet writes he is not simply contributing to his generation but he is contributing to the whole past of the literature by existing them in own work simultaneously and that is what makes a poet traditional. A poet who understands and accept the sense of past understands the great responsibility of his in the field. The question which arises here is, how to be different than others while contributing? For which Eliot answers that the art is not improvable but the material is not the same and it is better to bring novelty than to repeat the same thing. Jorge Luis Borges endeavours to write on a bird which has been already credited with almost all possible ways by the great minds like Virgil, Shakespeare and Keats. Because how generally people find a poet interesting is how much he is different than the others. What is unique of him compared to their predecessors? To bring the whole tradition into piece of work with great responsibility and yet keeping own unique position seems to be a difficult job. Because the existing order is already complete before the new work arrives and that is the confusion of Borges in his attempt writing about nightingale. For



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

which Eliot would say that the order is complete to be persisted with the supervening of novelty.

So far, three aspects of a poet are discussed, knowing the existing order, understanding the responsibility of past and bringing the novelty into the work keeping the past order in mind. Even after the successful achievement of the concepts discussed above, one should not be judged by the standards of the past. They simply should be measured with each other. And especially they only should be judged and not amputated, is what Eliot suggests.

Another major concept that Eliot emphasises in his essay is the quality of “Impersonalisation”. By which he means while judging anyone one must not adhere to any preferred period or private admirations neither should he consider a past as lump. While one judges anything, one judges the work and not the writer or a poet. One must remain impersonal in writing as well in judging. Poem should be judged in comparison to the poems by other authors and then with the particular author of the poem. In such comparison whosoever is great contributor, will assert his individuality. His uniqueness is his technicality and novelty in the order of literature. It is how makes own position. Emotions and feelings are two different things. Emotions are stable which can be evoked with variety of feelings. These emotions which are at liberty in the poem have their life in the poems and not in the history of the poets.

As discussed above, the voice of nightingale is depicted by many writers. The emotion is same, an amusing sound of the bird, but the feelings may differ. Borges attempts to write on the bird in a poem “to the Nightingale” which is to be analysed here with the concepts observed by Eliot in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”. As a reference and better understanding of the poem by Borges, it is given below.

On what secret night in England
Or by the incalculable constant Rhine,
Lost among all the nights of my nights,
Carried to my unknowing ear
Your voice, burdened with mythology,
Nightingale of Virgil, of the Persians?
Perhaps I never heard you, yet my life



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

I bound to your life, inseparably.
A wandering spirit is your symbol
In a book of enigmas. El Marino
Named you the siren of the woods
And you sing through Juliet's night
And in the intricate Latin pages
And from the pine-trees of that other,
Nightingale of Germany and Judea,
Heine, mocking, burning, mourning.
Keats heard you for all, everywhere.
There's not one of the bright names
The people of the earth have given you
That does not yearn to match your music,
Nightingale of shadows. The Muslim
Dreamed you drunk with ecstasy
His breast trans-pierced by the thorn
Of the sung rose that you reddened
With your last blood. Assiduously
I plot these lines in twilight emptiness,
Nightingale of the shores and seas,
Who in exaltation, memory and fable
Burn with love and die melodiously."

— Jorge Luis Borges



VIDHYAYANA

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

One can find many references to the bird nightingale in the poem. Which conveys us that Borges must have gone through the references that are cited. Nightingale has been poetic inspiration and symbol for many writers since ages. Different poets and writers have found the bird in different connotations. One finds the voice of bird joyous where the other finds it sorrowful. Nightingale is used as the myth of Philomela in Homer's Odyssey. In the poem one can find the references of the nightingale in the work of Virgil, in Persian scripts, in the theology of Judea, Muslim, in the books of Enigma, in the writings from Germany, Latin, in the words of Juliet and in the work of Keats. These references fulfil the criterion of knowing the past or knowing the tradition of what one wants to attempt. But if one is to analyse the poem, the task simply doesn't end by knowing the past. One needs to have the sense of past and understand his duty. To quote the lines from an essay Eliot suggests "Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities." Now the question remains is what is the responsibility that Eliot want to suggest. That responsibility is the novelty keeping the current generation in mind which sets poet's position. This position can only be set if the poet has its individual talent. As how a poet is appreciated is how he differs from his predecessors. What is his unique individuality? One can not value a poet in isolation, to value a poet he needs to be compared with his predecessors. Since, these many great writers have already described the bird, what rest can Borges do is the question to him. Here the bird nightingale remains the same but the technique or the material to express the bird and its voice must differ in a unique way, by which Borges can make his position into the order of poets.

When, in the fifth line of the poem, Borges writes that

"Carried to my unknowing ear

Your voice, burdened with mythology,"

He seems to understand his responsibility and his duty in the order. The word "Burdened" is all that we need to find if Borges is not only aware of the past but also understand his responsibility at par. He cannot simply write about the bird as he wishes and feels, he can not simply repeat what already had been written and felt by other in the past. He knows that what he feels about the bird and its voice is already felt by other in the past. repeating the same cannot make his position as a poet. Borges knows what all had been said about bird and about its voice. The emotion can be of joy or of sorrow as felt by poets in the past. But



VIDHYAYANA

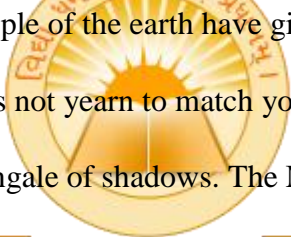
An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

they have depicted this voice with various feelings. In the book of enigmas, the voice of nightingale is considered as the wandering spirit of the night, while Virgil describes the voice as sorrowful and mourning sound. The lament of the Nightingale is compared with the mourning of Orpheus.

From “Romeo and Juliet” by Shakespeare, Borges quotes the words of Juliet. In Act 3, scene 5, Romeo and Juliet are talking during the time before dawn. Where Romeo’s perception about a voice of bird that is heard is of Lark, which represents the light where Juliet argues with him by calling the heard voice of Nightingale and not of Lark, which represents darkness. Shakespeare also makes a reference of the bird in his sonnet 102. Where he compares his poem of love with the nightingale. He mentioned nightingale of Germany and Judea as mocking, burning and mourning. About the Persian reference of nightingale is little obscure. However, Luce Baralt has investigated into very deeply and came up with more than thirty mystical symbols in Islamic mysticism. While Borges says that “perhaps I have never heard you yet my life” he might mean the joyous song of nightingale. He also mentioned the nightingale of Muslims as dreamed by them with ecstasy.



The people of the earth have given you
That does not yearn to match your music,
Nightingale of shadows. The Muslim
Dreamed you drunk with ecstasy

What is this ecstasy that has been dreamed by Muslims is also a little obscure reference, but Luce Baralt conveys it as below.

“Borges, who knew more about Muslim mystical literature than until recently we had thought, is entirely correct in evoking two nightingales, one Western and one Eastern. Because in fact their symbolic referents are diametrically opposed. We have already looked at the nightingale of Virgil and his European colleagues, but as we will see, many Sufis also used the simile of the nightingale, a bird venerated by Islam. Ahmad al-Ghazali, Ruzbehan Baqli, Attar, and especially the sublime Jamaluddin Rumi all incorporated the motif into their poetry. But unlike the nightingale of the Georgics, the nightingale of these Muslim authors (who generally wrote in Persian, although also in Arabic, Turkish, and Urdu) does not mourn, but rather celebrates mystical union. A line in Borges tells us this clearly: *El agareño / Te sueño arrebatado por el éxtasis*” (“The Muslim dreamed you / in the delirium of ecstasy”). The distinguished Islamicist



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

Annemarie Schimmel is clear about this: “[The nightingale of Persian poetry] is the bird of intoxicated love.” Thus, we have at last come across the “dulce Philomena” of St John of the Cross, a nightingale which preserves the externalities of classical mythology but behaves like a Persian bird.”

According to him Eastern and Western depiction of nightingale is different. One is sorrowful and other is ecstatic.

While saying these he also tries to judge the use of nightingale as symbol of different subjects as used by the former writers and poets calls them that they are all rightly used and there not a single name which doesn't match your name. along with that he conveys his worry that there not the single name which has not been attributed to you.

Borges has read Keats and also wrote some lectures and essays on Keats to be delivered. These manuscripts were purchased by Keats-Shelly house in 2010 at an auction held at Sotheby. In the manuscript there was an essay entitled “The Nightingale of Keats”. It is found from the manuscripts that the essay was written in 1952 and Borges might have continued to make references of Keats in his essays and lectures till 1960s. in his essay on Keats, Borges argues that English reader of Keats have not understood “Ode to a Nightingale” by Keats properly. In one of the lines from poem, Borges writes that Keats has heard the nightingale for all and by this he seems suggest that there is nothing more to say about the bird as almost much has been expressed already by such great poets. Thiers and Borges' emotions are the same. He feels inspired by the voice of the bird as other had felt. What is to be said more is a dilemma for Borges. Here, Borges device out the same block as his uniqueness and writes a poem with varied feeling. Where the emotion remains the same but the that emotion is expressed in a different way, with different feelings and technicality.

conclusion

Borges fulfils the concept of tradition by making references of nightingale from the past. He also fulfils the concept of great responsibility which are apparent in his use of words like “burdened with mythology”. He knows the past and his poem is altered by present and his present is directed by past, as Eliot suggested in the lines “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the” he is also impersonal while talking about different poets and writers in using the nightingale as symbol. Borges doesn't adhere to any personal appreciation nor to any preferred period. Neither does he call any writer as better craftsman nor he condemns any. He reads them all, gives justice to



VIDHYAYANA

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

them, compare them with each other by remaining impersonal and not by comparing the authors rather by comparing the works or poems.

Bibliography

- Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Delhi: Cengage Learning India Private Limited, 418, F.I.E., Patparganj, 2013.
- Baralt, Luce. "https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=luce+baralt+sufi+nightingale." n.d. <https://open.conted.ox.ac.uk/sites/open.conted.ox.ac.uk/files/resources/Create%20Document/Luce%20Baralt%20nightingale.pdf>. 03/11/2019 11 2019.
- "blog.bookstellyouwhy.com." n.d. <https://blog.bookstellyouwhy.com/jorge-luis-borges-at-the-keats-shelley-house-in-rome>. 03 11 2019.
- "POETRY FOUNDATION." n.d. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44479/ode-to-a-nightingale>. 03 11 2019.
- "POETRY FOUNDATION." n.d. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/jorge-luis-borges>. 03 11 2019.
- SparkNotes. n.d. 03 11 2019.
- "Wikipedia." n.d. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jorge_Luis_Borges. 03 11 2019.
- "Wikipedia." n.d. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common-nightingale>. 03 11 2019.

