Life, Literature, Motorcycles and Semiotics

Dr.K.R. Venkatesan
Professor and Head, Department of English
Principal, Sri Sankara Arts and Science College, Enathur, Kanchipuram.

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article History:
Received 05 July 2018
Received in revised form 10 July 2018
Accepted 15 July 2018
Available online 31 July 2018

Key words: Twentieth Century, Semiotics, Uncanny, Syntax and Discourse.

A B S T R A C T

Literature presents life in its true colours showing a path to the pathless and to the pathfinders. Life is full of strange surprises and literature too, hence both life and literature are uncanny and unpredictable again the dichotomy of fair-foul and foul-fair interplays. In this research article, an attempt is made to explicate the uncanniness of life and literature, through the poem “On the Move” by Thom Gunn. The poet presents the world where everyone is ‘on the move’ with ‘some hidden purpose’, resting themselves ‘in the undergrowth’ and ultimately ‘seeking their instinct’. Modern man is estranged from the original meaning of ‘a man’. He is more mechanical than human. Broken humanism is expressed through the broken semiotics and syntaxes of the poet. They are the messages for humanity about absolute and absoluteness.

Life..... It has infinite possibilities, sometimes clear as the clear blue sky, most of the times dark, enigmatic, confusing and absurd, sometimes mysterious and miraculous, yet beautiful at times. It thrills, questions, fails, slaps, consoles, teaches and delights. Life is a boon in the same time it is a bane. It is a boon for those who can understand, and it is a bane for those who fail to. It is the circumstances that make or mar a man. “It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing” is perhaps the substantial expression of Macbeth, a brave warrior, whose life was contradictory to his acts of bravery in the battlefield, as it ends in his failure to come to terms with his own psychological conflicts with the acquisition of power. In the world fair is foul and fouls fair. Witches, devils and demons can be fair and the self-advertising fair individuals play fools, fooling the poor. “All the world's a stage, /And all the men and women merely players;/... and one man in his time plays many parts...”. It is literature which presents life in its true colours showing a path to the pathless and to the pathfinders.

Life is full of strange surprises and literature too, hence both life and literature are uncanny and unpredictable again the dichotomy of fair-foul, foul-fair interplays. Literature sublimates life by presenting the characters on the stage with variety of conflicting emotions, questions and puzzles which a man in the off-stage delves with it, identifies himself fully or partly with it, puzzles at the fact that the character on the stage is a replica of himself. A transmission of feeling takes place, an emotional trafficking occurs in the process of writing a text in the mind of the author and reading/visualizing (drama) the text in the case of the reader. The walking shadow (the reader) reading the text, watching the performance on the stage (audience) is though not transformed is transmuted and dumbfounded. The power of life and the power of literature are uncanny.

Thom Gunn shows that everyone is ‘on the move’ with ‘some hidden purpose’, resting themselves ‘in the undergrowth’ (shows that the men portrayed are not in a position to come openly with their true, original faces, always masked, hiding their identity, meaning that people with hidden motives are not ‘resting’ as birds naturally and ‘freely’ rest, but are ‘hiding’ since they have secret

*Corresponding author.
Email address: krsvankara@gmail.com

purposes and motives), ‘seeking their instinct’. Clearly, man is instinctual and his whole life is the reflections of his own actions and reactions towards the instincts. Man spends almost all his life answering his instinct, reacting to it, (either positively or negatively), tries to fulfill them, ends in a happy or a tragic note, depending upon its success or failure.

Men come in ‘gleaming jackets trophied with the dust’, signifying the materialistic desire for a man in awards, trophies and rewards, wealth pomposity and glory. Hiding themselves in the jackets of their filthy intellectualty, vainglorious crowns of names, cosmetics, costumes and all the semiotics of the stage, they truly break the semantics of life and its purpose. Life finally proves to be a ‘dust’ and the trophies are ‘awarded’ to those ‘dusty’ personalities who finally go to the ‘dust’ unwept, unhonourd and unsung.

They strap in doubt – by hiding it, robust-
And almost hear a meaning in their noise.

A person who is strapped in doubt, implies that he merely ‘exists’ and is not ‘living’. Such people, who do not live originally, hiding their emotions, cannot live, but they can only exist without the essence of life. In the world of confusions, commotions and conflicts (referred to as ‘noise’, which can also mean a psychological trauma, the cry of the depressed, who hides himself in his ‘fair’ disposition – jackets - for the outer world, suppressing all his inward failures, tortures within himself), can appear to be a robust, for example a Macbeth, with vaulting ambitions.; but in the noise, how can he hear the voice of his own self; how can he find his directions, how can he decipher any sense or meaning?

A man who is hiding himself cannot get a ‘meaning’ because, he is doubly moved from reality. He himself is an actor (on the stage in the world) and playing multiple roles in his life, hiding his original self, his emotions and feelings, covering his originality with a jacket, suitable for the incidents and situations, speaking a language with syntax – discoursing, but with no semantics. It can be meaningful for the outer world, but the speaker’s mind alone knows how meaningless the discourses are, since he has only been acting, he is only ‘existing’ and not ‘living’. So, his speech is a noise, as though he is (as Macbeth says):

’a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more,
Signifying nothing’

Man has become a machine, a motor, an automobile, a motorcycle, and he is estranged from the original meaning of ‘a man’. Humanity, humaneness, humanism, original-genuine love and its expression, understanding, togetherness, familial system, nature fostering, law abiding, fellow-feeling (is it fellow-felling now?), are withered from him. Perhaps ‘age withers’ and a ‘terrible beauty is born’ (as told by W.B.Yeats). In the words of T.S.Eliot, in The Hollow Men, though we are ‘stuffed’, (with the sixth sense), we don’t talk, but we whisper meaningless discourses:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men

...We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass

In such broken semiotics, in the breakdown of communication, the interaction in the world is only a futile, and meaningless, signifying the fact that man only leads a mechanical life, though he can boast himself saying that he is having the ultimate power, forgetting the fact that before nature he is only a puppet (reminds of Shakespeare saying: “As flies to wanton boys, are we to gods; they kill us for their sports” in King Lear).

Once again T.S.Eliot can be recalled, when he says in his The Hollow Men that the modern man is only shape, a shadow, and only a gesture.

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion

We are living in a world, where gestural communication and the body language is given importance, and not to the communication of the self and the soul, which perhaps John Keats was advocating “Beauty is Truth and Truth Beauty”. Modern man has got motion, but it is the motion of a motorcycle. He is interested in the ‘mechanics’ and the ‘technicalities’ and the ‘statistics’ and not with the ‘emotions’ ‘feelings’ and the ‘passion’. This is what Thom Gunn point out that

They ride, direction where the tyres press.

Having lost the direction, (because, the ‘sign’ is not understood or ‘signified’; to them, the signifiers are merely notations, merely keyed- in data, and they don’t transform into the signified so that the semiotic cycle can complete) they confuse the soul with the machine. To them, the soul and the machine are one and the same, where man is ‘conscious’ in expression of ‘emotions’ and ‘feelings’ and
hence in the modern world emotional intelligence is given a lot of importance; once again a wild mismatch, raising a question how come the emotions can be ‘consciously’ expressed and measured.

Imperfect match between emotions and thoughts, thoughts and words, and words and the deeds, is caused because the instincts are not his own, but they are very often stolen or borrowed. When man tries to join those borrowed instincts, his expression also becomes borrowed one, (with little or lack of originality, devoid of personal or private emotions inter-oven), it often divides and breaks both himself and the world in which he lives in:

One lacks direct instinct, because one wakes
Afloat on movement that divides and breaks.

Perfect synthesis or synchronization of the original expressions of a man’s syntax, if it gives the intended semantics, in the given context of life with its pragmatics, can place a man globally in the natural semiotics. As far as Thom Gunn is concerned, sainthood, an image of a perfect humanism, with all purity, sanctity, compassion, kind-heartedness and all the virtues which can be expected of in a human being, can be a culmination, a canonization or the end towards which a man can shape his life; for the saints, whom Thom Gunn says, ‘complete their purposes’; they have co-notated their signified of the signifiers, where there is a complete signification process, they themselves becoming the ‘signs’, in turn the ‘signs’ transforms into ‘symbols’. Man has to transform from being a mere ‘sign’ into a ‘symbol’, in the semiotics of the world’s stage, and for that purpose only the sixth sense has been endowed.

Man is always in motion, moving restlessly and relentlessly as a motorcycle, as a man is born, going to school, falling in love, getting married, or failing in love, or a man, who didn’t fall in love at all, taking up a job, or jobless, ‘appearing’ in so many roles, acting, speaking, (most of the time meaningless), and he is not at all reaching to the absolute, for which he has been created.

As far as Thom Gunn is concerned, life is still enigmatic, because is the man is always near the absolute but still he is away from it. The man can be considered to be both in and out of life. If he can be ‘in’ life, succeeding in his quest for meaning, in his quest for the ‘absolute’ meaning, as the saints do. He is at once nearer to his goal (this is the best part of him, the natural aspects of a man, driving him to the absoluteness), and far away from it (because of the borrowed instincts, imitated objectives, lack of individualism, and materialistic pursuits):

At worst, one is in motion; and at best,
Reaching no absolute, in which to rest,
One is always nearer by not keeping still.

World, it is said that would be controlled by ‘robotics’ some scientists say. Man can be replaced by robots. Literature is playing its vital role through the poets Shakespeare, T.S.Eliot and Thom Gunn (as far as this paper is concerned), to caution man, exposing the facts, how a man is deviating himself from the social semiotics and becomes a machine, an automobile and a motorcycle by himself. Is it not the right time to wake up and to focus on the absolute?

References