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Aesthetics of Australian Aboriginal Trickster: A Perusal of C. J. Dennis' "The Crow"

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Abstract

This paper titled, "Aesthetics of Australian Aboriginal Trickster: A Perusal of C. J. Dennis' "The Crow"" intends to brief about the myths related to the Australian Aboriginal Trickster figure in general and with special reference to, the Crow. The paper briefs about the common traits found in the mythical figure, i.e., tricksters. The paper also tries to explore the common characteristics of the tricksters by analysing "The Crow (Australian Raven)" a poem by C. J. Dennis. Mythical creature or characters generally possess certain kind of supernatural qualities. They take up any form for instance, animals, human beings, god/goddess etc as they are known as the masters of transformation. Mythical figures are sometimes hybrid in nature especially the tricksters. Tricksters are regarded to be the archetypal figure that most frequently appears in the myths, legends or even in the folklores of many cultures. Tricksters are even treated as a comic stereotype also. They take up the roles of a fool or even as a clown, but their main intention is to convey certain social messages. Tricksters imbibe specific social and moral values as they are cultural specific. In other words, tricksters are

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regarded as cultural-heroes. Tricksters embody vitality of the culture to which they belong as every culture has their own mythical trickster figures. The ideologies, belief, rituals of the society are being questioned and challenged by the trickster figures. They are at times used as a weapon of resistance too. Tricksters are generally animal figures mostly found in the mythical tales and folklores and also a polyvalent creature. Anansi, the Spider, Coyote, Renart the Fox, Crow, Puck, Nanabozho are some of the tricksters found in across region and culture. Apart from the mythical tricksters there are literary tricksters too. The Shakespearean wise fool, the animal figures depicted in the Aesop's fables, the confidence man who appears in some of the nineteenth century novels and also the Odysseus wandering hero are the literary figures spotted in various works of literature.

Keywords: Trickster, Crow, Myth, Tricky, Master of Transformation.

Mythical figures are those who appear in mythology or folklore who possess some kind of supernatural powers. These figures are represented as a part of human culture. They can take up any form like human beings, animals, God, spirit, anthropomorphic beings etc. In such a case, mythical figures can be compared with that of a chimera, which is a combination of animals or other creatures. Apart from the supernatural qualities that the mythical figures possess, they carry moral as well as social values of a particular culture to which they belong. Mythical creatures can be in the form of birds and serpents, monsters, chimers and hybrids, animals, part-human beings, humanoid figures etc. Trickster can be hailed as one of the mythical figure who possess supernatural abilities and also takes up several forms when needed. William J. Hynes and William G. Doty defines a trickster in their seminal work *Mythical Trickster Figures* (1993) as,

Animal-Person, Anti-Hero, Confidence-person, Demiurge, Lord of the Animals, Numskull, Old Man, Picaro, Selfish Buffoon, Selfish Deceiver, Swindler, Transformer (24).

The word 'trickster' literally means the one who deceives or cheats. They are the mythical being who also appear as God, Goddess, and spirit, human, animal or even as an

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anthropomorphic being. The most common attributes of a trickster are cultural-heroes, the messenger of God, a foolish being and most commonly they are known as the shape-shifters. Tricksters generally symbolize the binary, i.e., an amalgamation of the opposing traits. Joseph Russo in an article asserts that a, “Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator...” (242-43). Tricksters have the capability to create and destroy a particular situation. They can completely change or transform the mood of a particular occasion or situation. They have the tendency to help others and the very next moment they can negate what they have done. They are at times a source of laughter as they inherit the characteristics of a fool. Tricksters are also comical in nature. Trickster violates all taboos, they tries to rebel and disobeys the rules and also transgresses the values of the society. Ricketts identified a trickster in myth as the one whom, “personify all the traits of man raised to the highest degree” (347). The qualities of human being represented in a sublime way are called as the tricksters. In other words, a trickster makes use of human qualities by combining the supernatural features with them.

Archetypes are the ideas or symbols or can be even the pattern or the character-type within a story. Archetypes appear again and again within a story. Thus, tricksters are regarded to be one of the Jungian archetypes. Jung used the idea of an archetype to explain the images that are envisioned in dreams and fantasies which are similar to the universal motifs that are found in legends, myths and religions. Jung regarded the trickster to be the shadow of a culture because each culture represents a trickster figure of their own which carries their tradition and cultural values. In other words, Jung in his work *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1980) says that, archetypes are the “pattern of behaviours” (5). In other words, for Jung archetypes are the elements that shapes one’s behaviour. It means that, the instincts which are hidden in our unconscious mind help us to control our behaviour. Thus, for Jung archetypes indirectly mean the instincts.

William J. Hynes and William G. Doty pointed out six characteristics that are common to almost all trickster figures found in various mythologies. The major qualities as pointed out

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by Hynes and Doty are: ambiguous and anomalous, deceiver/trick-player, shape-shifter, situation-inventor and inverter, messenger/imitator of the Gods and sacred and lewd bricoluer. Ambiguity is aroused when the binary element present in this character is used for playing some tricks upon others. Tricksters are those who often deviate from the normal rules breaking all the taboos and conventions of the society. The polyvalent trait present in them that is they are capable of transforming themselves into any form at any time which becomes one of the reasons of confusion and dilemma. The six features highlighted by Hynes and Doty are in a way are inter-related.

Trickster, the word itself suggests that they are trick players and they use their tricks in order to cheat others. Their intention by playing tricks on others is not to harm anyone, but they do everything with a specific reason and intention as well. The tricks the tricksters play with carry some kind of moral values. The most common trick used by tricksters is transforming themselves into other forms or in other words, they make use of their shape-shifting ability to play trick on others. They transform from one form to another, for instance, from human to God, male to female, God to animal etc. By sudden transformation tricksters are able to create confusion as well as change the mood of that particular situation. In other terms, it can be interpreted that, they can create an entirely new situation or change the exiting situation to another mood. Trickster possess divine qualities as they are considered to be a sacred being too as they become half-human-half-divine figure at certain events. They make use of their divine abilities along with their super natural qualities that they possess and act as the messenger of Gods and also imitate the power of Gods upon other creatures. Tricksters are regarded to be intelligent characters and on the other hand they behave as if they are the foolish being in the universe. Tricksters are sexually promiscuous characters. They have an appetite for hunger as well as they are greedy. They tend to eat their own organs as they cannot withstand their hunger.

Trickster figure can be found across culture and region of the world. As mentioned earlier, tricksters are represented as animals in the legendary and mythical tales and also

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those they are usually male figures too. As they are the shape-shifters, they tend to change and transform their shape, form and even gender whenever a need arise. Tricksters are usually found in mythical tales as well as folklore of certain culture. Some of the very common as well as famous tricksters found in folklore and mythical tales are as follows: Brer Rabbit and Aunt Nancy found in American folklore; Anansi the Spider, the trickster figure in West African, African American and Caribbean folklore; Bamapana, Crow/Raven represent the Australian Aboriginal myth; Coyote, the trickster of North American folklore; in English folklore we can see the trickster figures like Robin Hood, Puck ; it is Renart the Fox who portrays the French folklore; when it comes to Hindu mythology, it is Baby Krishna, Hanuman; Kitsune stands for Japanese mythology; Nanabozho symbolizes Ojibwe myth; Ivan the Fool is the trickster that embodies the Russian folklore; in Spanish mythology, it is the Don Juan; whereas, Loki symbolizes the Norse mythology and so on.

Apart from the mythical and legendary tales, tricksters are to be found in many literary works as well. Writers present the characters of the novels by possessing one or the other feature of trickster or even they depict tricksters as comical character too. Tricksters are even used in literary works as a tool of resistance in some works as well. There are many literary trickster figures that appear in literatures. For instance, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the mischievous and spiritual character Puck is the trickster. Puck is represented as a humorous creature that makes people fall in and out of love. The Cheshire cat, who is a character in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, is the one whom qualifies the trickster traits. The Cheshire cat helps Alice and also disrupts the traditional logic followed by the people around him. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series depicts Peeves, Fred and George Weasley as carrying the qualities of a trickster. Vivienne Cleven's *Bitin' Back* represents Nevil Dooley as the trickster figure who makes use of the shape-shifting quality of the trickster. Bobby Wabalanginy in Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* is another literary trickster figure, who imbibes the trait of in-betweenness and also becomes the representative of the Aboriginal culture, i.e., the Noongars. Many such characters can be

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analyzed from the literary works that can be attributed with the qualities of tricksters. In contemporary fictional works too, tricksters are a recurring character type used by the writers.

The crow can be treated as the trickster figure, ancestral being and also the cultural-hero of the Australian Aboriginal myth. Crow is otherwise known as the Raven or Waa/Wahn or Waang in different parts of Australia. Crow and the Eaglehawk Bunjil together are considered as the 'moiety ancestors' (term used for Australian Aboriginal kinship that concerns the customary law practiced by the Australians). Eaglehawk Bunjil is a form of wedge-tailed eagle in Australian Aboriginal myth which is another trickster like figure found in the regions of Australia. Waa or the Crow was the one who helped the Eaglehawk Bunjil and his people to fly upward as Crow was in charge of the wind bag. Bunjil became the star Altair (the brightest star) in the sky after he flew upwards. Likewise there are several mythical tales related to the Crow and Bunjil.

Fire was brought to mankind and also they stole the same is another interesting mythical tale regarding Crow. The story is like, the Karatgurk women used to cook yam and the Crow got a chance to taste the yam cooked by the women. Thus, the Crow found it tastier than the raw vegetable that he usually used to have. As a result, the Crow decided to cook yam by himself, but Crow was not having fire to cook the yams. The women folk refused to share the fire with the Crow. The Crow then resolved to play his tricks upon the women as they refused to share the fire with him. Crow asked the women folk to dig an ant mound as Crow convinced them that the ant mound was having huge amount of ant larvae which is much tastier than the yams they used to eat. The women believed in Crow's words as it was a trick played by the Crow as he hid a number of snakes inside the ant mound. By believing the Crow's words, women started digging the mound which made the snakes furious and restless and started attacking the women. By this time, the crooked and cunning Crow took away the coals that were left by the ladies. Meanwhile, Bunjil asked the Crow for some coals to cook some possum, but the Crow neglected Bunjil's request. As a result a group gathered around the Crow threatening him to share the secret of fire with them. Finally the Crow had to share

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the secret with them. Suddenly the coals got a bushfire causing a burn in Crow's feathers. This is how the Crow became black in colour permanently.

Next comes the story of two brothers born with white feathers namely, the Crow and the Magpie. The Crow and the magpie often fought with each other regarding who is the most beautiful among them. During one such fight, accidentally they fell into a fire which burned the Crow completely and the Magpie partly. This is regarded to be a mythical tale by those who considered Crow to be their totem and also story pertaining to how the Crow became black in colour. On the other hand, there are some who worship Magpie who says that both of them fell into black mud which made slight black stain for the magpie; whereas the Crow was completely immersed into the black mud which turned the colour of the Crow to that of black. The Crow is known as the powerful among the Australian Aboriginal totems and also treated to be the intelligent, cunning bird among other group of birds. The Crow is also observed as the carrier of old knowledge.

Another interesting mythical tale is that of the Crow and the Swamp Hawk. In this story the trick played by the Crow upon the Swamp is evident as the Crow planted some echidna quills in the nest of a kangaroo rat. The Swamp used to visit the nest of the kangaroo rat often to catch the rat to meet his hunger. One day while the Swamp was trying to catch hold of the rat, his feet got stuck by the quills lay down by the Crow. The Crow played this trick as he do not wanted the Swamp to catch the rats easily rather help the hawk to catch the rats. Apart from the stories or tales narrated, there are some other mythical tales that reveal that the Crow was sent to the heavens where he became the Canopus or the second brightest star. Another myth related to the Crow is that he attacks the spirits who are on their way to their afterlife, because Crow is always chased away when they scavenge.

Australian Aboriginals have another trickster figure other than the Crow, namely Bamapana, the crazy man who is the trickster hero of the Murngin of Northern Australia. Generally, Bamapana are obscene, blasphemous, profane and lewd in character. As tricksters are good at creating chaos and problems for others, Bamapana is responsible for creating

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discordance among groups. Like tricksters who are known for breaking the rules and taboos of the society, Bamapana too breaks all the taboos of the society. Another point of interest in this particular trickster figure is that, he is being charged with committing incest. Tricksters are usually attributed as a lustful being or the one with sexual appetite. Thus, committing incest from the side of Bamapana can be rightly compared with the lustful nature of trickster as well.

C. J. Dennis (1876-1938), the Australian poet well known for his verse novel *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* (1915). The Australian slang was popularised in the literatures by Dennis. Dennis is known as “the laureate of the larrikin”. His first poem was “The Best of the Six”. He is credited as the founder of the literary magazine *The Gadfly*. Some of his major works include *Backblock Ballads and Other Verses*(1913), *The Glugs of Gosh*(1917), *The Singing Garden*(1935) and so on; some of his most famous poems are “The Austra-laise”(1908) and “An Old Marter” (1910).

“The Crow (Australian Raven)” is a poem taken from the collection *The Singing Garden* (1935). *The Singing Garden* is not a verse story, but it contains poems as well as essays about birds. An interesting feature of this collection is that, most poems are written from the imagined point of view of the bird. The book is divided into four sections representing the four seasons namely Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter respectively. C. J. Dennis has used simple and precise words to describe the bird. The poem “The Crow” consists of three stanzas each and each stanza carries the traits of the bird Crow which qualifies the features that is attributed to the trickster figure too. The poem “The Crow (Australian Raven)” belongs to the section of Winter and the poem goes like this...

The Crow (Australian Raven)

A low-living fellow, I haven't a friend;
My heart, like my habit, is black;
My nature is “yellow”; my greed has no end,
And every virtue I lack.

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The aerial gangster, the bird racketeer
Wherever I go follows frenzy and fear;
But I flap on my way with a curse and a sneer
To bluster and bully and sack.

My methods are savage. I come with my
mob
To harry the helpless and weak,
To rend and to ravage, to murder and rob,
And my ways are the ways of a sneak.
No meat is amiss to my cavernous maw;
I kidnap the nestlings; I bow to no law;
Then I'm off on my way with a sinister caw
Or an egg at the end of my beak.

I'm cautious and cunning and gruesome and
grim;
For what I can't slaughter I maim.
But if you come gunning your chances are
slim,
For I know every trick of the game.
My signals are many, my sentries alert;
Bird-shot or abuses do me little hurt;
And, like every gangster, my gifts I pervert.
In short, I'm a fowl of ill-fame.

In the first stanza we could find the Crow speaking about his state of mind as well as describing his/her colour. The Crow regards him/herself as a "low-living fellow" as he/she

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“haven’t a friend”. Tricksters are also lonely as they don’t have any friends because of the tricks and actions they do. The Crow says that is he/she is black in colour likewise its heart is also the same. It can mean that the loneliness has made his heart dark. The word “yellow” in the poem connotes cowardice, i.e., lack of courage. Even though crow is the intelligent among the birds, they are hesitant to do anything because they always fly with “a curse” on their back. Likewise tricksters too are smart and intelligent. Crow like the trickster are greedy and they say they lack virtue. It means that in many mythologies, the bird is given a negative connotation like they symbolise the dark state i.e., death; whereas, they also symbolize life at times. This feature is similar to that of trickster’s binary quality. They can be good and evil, represent life and death at the same time. Crow like trickster are part of the “gangster” as well as the “racketeer”. Tricksters do commit crimes at times and they are the leaders of the crime they commit. Likewise, Crows are regarded as the “aerial gangster” and commit crimes. Transformation is a feature of the Crow as well. They can turn a calm situation into a panic and fearful situation. Crow says that, they are always bullied upon and also they bully others too.

Second stanza points out all the misdeeds performed by the Crow. The Crow says that, “my methods are savage”, i.e. methods are not civilised. Tricksters are also regarded as uncivilised creatures because of the actions they do. The Crow comes with his/her “mob” or gang to attack those “helpless and weak”. The Crow “sneak” into everything “to rend and ravage, to murder and rob”. The Crow like the trickster is intended in destroying everything and anything. The crow points out that there is no meat which is not “amiss” to his/her belly. They also kidnap the food from other birds’ nests. Tricksters are also good at stealing food and they have an appetite for hunger. Like trickster, crow doesn’t adhere to any law. After committing all wrong things, Crow says that, they will fly as if they were the unlucky creatures by holding an egg in its beak.

Finally, we can see the crow speaking about his nature of cunningness and the rebel present in him/her. The Crow says that they are cautious, at the same time harmful and

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gloomy. They carry with a mixture of feelings like the trickster. The Crow gives a warning about him/herself that, if he/she is not able to kill other birds or prey, they will harm or wound themselves. If others are planning to attack the crow, they say that the chances are very less because he/she is expert in all the tricks. The Crow is the master of tricks. They have many ways to play tricks upon others. If someone comes to attack the crow, they say “my sentries alert”, i.e. guard is always vigilant to prevent any attack. Abuses have slight impact upon the crow because they are very strong creatures. They can twist and turn as they are the master of the gangster. At last the crow defines him/her as a “fowl of ill-frame”. Crow always views him/herself as a negative or a fowl creature. But as already mentioned, they are at times treated as a symbol of life too.

By analysing the poem one can rightly point out the similarities between the trickster figure and the crow. Like the trickster, the crow is also greedy. Tricksters are regarded as a part of gangster which is also applicable to the crow. Apart from being a gangster the crow takes up the role of a racketeer too. The deeds done by the crow is similar to that of the actions performed by the tricksters. The Crow attacks others and destroy everything in front of them. Like the tricksters, they act as an intelligent being and also the next moment they perform all those uncivilised actions. Tricksters and the crow are harmful at times, but they are cautious too. Both the creatures are cunning in nature. Tricksters as well as the crow can be considered as the masters of transformation as they can turn up anything. Both the trickster and the crow have binary qualities within them. For instance, qualities like life and death; intelligent and stupid and so on. Breaking taboos is another common trait that can be attached to the trickster and the crow. Both the creatures are not bothered about others. They always wanted to break the rules of the society.

CONCLUSION

Trickster tale or myths helps to explain the human behaviour as they represent the features of human beings in a sublime manner. They possess supernatural power which differentiates them from human beings. Trickster becomes a source of entertainment or

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laughter. They play tricks on others as not to harm them, but for a social purpose and convey a message too. Trickster represents a particular culture or myth which helps to share the history of that culture or region. At times trickster is used as a metaphor of resistance. Their ambiguous and shape-shifting characteristics assist them to fight and also resist themselves from the attack. Archetypes represent universal figures. For instance, tricksters are also treated as universal figure. Each region represents a form of trickster whom carries various mythical and legendary tales along with them.

The mythical tales related to the Australian Aboriginal trickster, the crow brings forth the qualities of the particular bird. From the myths, it is clear that the crow is endorsed with the features like cunningness, greedy; trickery as well as they tends to steal things from others. They are also regarded as the problem makers. Apart from all the negative features credited to the bird, they also perform some good deeds too. From the myth it is clear that, it was the crow who gave the mankind fire. C. J. Dennis's poem also highlights the same features that are attributed to the bird through the mythical tales. Dennis's poem too brings forth the features like greedy, destroyer, transformer, and cunningness and so on. Thus, the crow can be considered as the trickster figure present in the Australian Aboriginal myths.

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