

**Critiquing the ‘Quest’ Archetype:
 THINKING ACROSS BOUNDARIES**

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Prototypically, the idea of **Interdisciplinarity** precludes a combination of two or more disciplines. It is in Aristotelian terms a **creative reconstruction** rather than a literary transcription by *thinking across boundaries*. The term interdisciplinary is applied in literary criticism to describe a methodology that connects and integrates different schools of thought in the pursuit of a common task. For instance, Northrop Frye’s *Archetypal Literary Criticism*, is concerned with analysing a text keeping its concern with myths, archetypes and social rituals. In literary criticism, the term *archetype* denotes recurrent narrative designs, patterns of action, character-types, themes and images in a wide variety of works of literature. Among the most popular of archetypes we have the death-rebirth theme, the journey to the underworld, the heavenly ascent, the Paradise/hades dichotomy, the Promethean rebel-hero, the scape-goat, the earth-goddess, the fatal woman and the concept of ‘Quest’. Among all these, the ‘Quest’ motif is found in almost all Asian/Eastern and European/Western literatures. A proposal is therefore made to *locate* the ‘Quest’ motif as a recurrent universal ‘site’ that beautifully assimilates the core ideology of self-realization inherent in both Eastern and Western thought.

(i) **RAMAYANA:**

Rama’s ‘Quest’ for his wife Sita, kidnapped by Ravana (the demon king of Lanka) is the basis of the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*. Rama, prince of Ayodhya, won the hand of the beautiful Sita, but through the plotting of his wicked stepmother was exiled with his wife for 14 years. In the forest Sita was carried off by the demon Ravana. Rama was befriended by the monkeys who ranged the world looking for her. Once her kidnapper had been discovered, Rama and his allies then attacked Lanka, killed Ravana and rescued Sita. However, to prove her chastity, Sita entered fire, but was vindicated by the gods and restored to her husband. After the couple’s triumphant return to Ayodhya, Rama’s rule (Ram-raj) inaugurated a golden age for all mankind.

In the *Ramayana* the ‘Quest’ motif that epitomises Rama’s search for Sita needs to be understood on the lines of man’s perpetual quest for his true ‘self’. Rama looks for Sita, following her abduction, across the forests and eventually locates her in Lanka. In fact, the character, Rama has been in quest ever since his birth. Where is true knowledge of the self to

be found? Is it in the pursuit of 'Kingship', in the bonds of 'marriage', in the severity of 'exile', in the problematics of destruction through 'warfare' or in good governance after 'homecoming'? One notices that Rama's 'self-quest' moves at both the literal and metaphorical levels. The character Rama visits and travels with many highly enlightened sages during his exile. They become the catalyst to remind Rama of his true-identity and they too assist him in his 'Quest' of Sita, thereby becoming the mechanism to confront and destroy evil. A parallel could thus be drawn with the popular Upanishadic maxim of *Ayam atma brahma* (I am Brahma) and as this is the ultimate goal an individual needs to have, Rama attains enlightenment through a process of self-discovery and self-realization. Ravana's discourse of resistance by eventually offering himself to be deconstructed year after year is just not to mark the ultimate victory of good (Rama) over evil (Ravana), but more importantly the binaries of Rama and Ravana are an inseparable part of every human being and therefore, as each man has to carry his own cross, every 'being' (human or divine) in the process of 'becoming' has to overcome and transcend these fixed binaries to attain self-realization.

(ii) **THE HOLY GRAIL:**

The legend of the Holy Grail is one of the most enduring in Western European literature and art. The Grail was said to be the cup of the Last Supper and at the crucifixion to have received blood from Christ's side. It was brought to Britain by Joseph of Arimathea, where it lay hidden for centuries. The search for the vessel became the 'Principal Quest' for the knights of King Arthur. It was believed to be kept in a mysterious castle surrounded by a wasteland and guarded by a custodian called the Fisher King, who suffered from a wound that would not heal. His recovery and the renewal of the blighted lands depended on the successful completion of the quest. Equally the self-realization of the questing knight was assured by finding the Grail.

Thus, in the western tradition too, right from the crucifixion of Jesus Christ to the death of King Arthur, the 'Quest' of the Grail as a mysterious object of search and as the source of the ultimate mystical experience, has been celebrated both literally and metaphorically. Here too, the motif of the 'Quest' as in the Ramayana, becomes important. The Quest, needlessly to say, is the driving force in the Biblical tradition too. Right from the 'Book of Genesis', where Adam and Eve are placed in the garden of Eden to the Revelations made by the disciples of Christ, one does not fail to notice that the 'Quest' motif engages the human mind. For instance, the 'Quest' for the 'Divine Commandments' by Moses is the ultimate example for locating the true self in the society. Similarly, Samson's act of disobedience and his subsequent self-realization or the very life of John the Baptist or Jesus Christ is nothing but a corpus that revolves around the motif of 'Quest'. The 'Quest' for self-realization could be through the symbolic acts of 'Baptism', 'Confession' or through the act of 'Crucifixion'. *Cut the I across and hang it on the cross* and then you could call yourself a good Samaritan. Although the process of the 'Quest' for one's true self is fret with difficulties and dangers, the knights of King Arthur take up the challenge and eventually finds ultimate satisfaction only when they are face to face with their true selves. The magical properties attributed to the Holy Grail have also been traced to the magic vessels of Celtic myth and to

ambrosia (nectar – food of the gods in the Indian mythical tradition) that satisfied the tastes and needs of all who ate and drank from them. Hereto, the ‘Quest’ motif could find similarities with the supreme state of *Pragyanam Brahman* (Awareness is God). The journey of adventure without is essentially a journey within. The ‘Quest’ would find complete fulfilment only when the knight has attained to this state of awareness or consciousness. Of all the knights – the simple Perceval, the thoughtful Bors, the rash Gawain, the weak Lancelot and the saintly Galahad – only one is judged worthy enough to see the mysteries within the sacred vessel and look upon the ineffable. In other words, the ‘Quest’ motif stands for the realization of the kingdom of heaven within man. And only those who are ‘worthy’ can attain to this supreme state through the act of spiritual chivalry, fighting ceaselessly with their lower selves on the stormy sea of life to uplift and elevate the human soul to higher ideals of self-illumination and bliss.

(iii) **THE VOYAGES OF SINDBAD THE SAILOR:**

Similarly, the voyages of Sindbad the sailor, undertaken initially in order to restore his lost fortune and subsequently in search for adventure, appear in the great compilation of eastern stories popularly known as the *Arabian Nights*. They are a series of stories told by Sindbad, a merchant of Baghdad, about seven fantastic journeys he has made. During his journey, he suffers many disasters from which he always makes a miraculous escape, often using great ingenuity and cunning. He encounters giant birds, huge serpents, cannibals and other monsters; he is buried alive and he is sold into slavery. Despite his many misfortunes, he always manages to amass a fortune and return home a rich man.

In the Arabian tradition, too, one does not fail to see and emphasize upon the ‘Quest’ motif. All the journeys that Sindbad undertakes are nothing but a ‘Quest’ of one’s true self. It is therefore important for Sindbad to undertake one adventure after another for the ‘Quest’ of the self is perpetual in nature. In fact, parallels can be drawn between Homer’s *Odysseus* and Tennyson’s *Ulysses*, who too undertake adventures repeatedly. *To strive, to seek, to find and never to yield* is the formula that drives Ulysses and Sindbad on and on. And in the process, there are difficulties of the seven vices – pride, wrath, sloth, lust, envy, greed and gluttony – that assume the form of demons, giant birds, serpents and monsters – and must be overcome. Hereto, the voyages of Sindbad symbolically suggest that the real ‘Quest’ is prone with problematics of the highest order. The Upanishads refer to the ‘Quest’ of the self as *Tat Tvam Asi* (That thou Art). For man is fundamentally God. However, this understanding comes through the voyage of experience. In fact, Sindbad’s story, is the story of every man’s mythical quest of romance, adventure and enlightenment. His ‘Quest’ culminates in the seventh voyage when he gives up travelling as he has symbolically covered the entire globe [as the medieval muslim geographers divided the world into seven *kishers* (regions)]. Sindbad now realizes that his ‘Quest’ is not ‘without’ in the world of nature, fluctuating between the sea (unfamiliar) and the land (familiar), but ‘within’ with his own self.

(iv) **THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS**

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly roll a rock to the top of the mountain, from whence the stone would fall back. And if one believes Homer, Sisyphus was the wisest and most prudent of mortals, so why would he undertake this dreadful but futile punishment? One opinion tells us that as Sisyphus stole the secrets of the gods he was consequently punished. Here again, parallels can be drawn with the Indian philosophy of selfless-action (*karmasiddhanta*) where individuals should work without expecting any reward or benefit as its end. The process of ‘ascent’ (rolling the rock uphill) and ‘descent’ (rolling the rock downhill); Happiness and sorrow; good and evil; pleasure and pain are the two absurd happenings of life. They are inseparable. Man has only to ‘act’ his part without philosophising at its futility or sterility for the true ‘Quest’ lies in the ‘process’ of action and not in its consequence. Similarly, the empathy with the Upanishadic maxim – *Aham Brahmasmi* (I am God) is subject to the process of intense austerity and penance. This consciousness is given only to a wise man like Sisyphus.

In all the four stories i.e., the *Ramayana*, the Holy Grail, the *Arabian Nights* and the Myth of Sisyphus – the ‘Quest’ motif is seen – loud and clear. And, quite invariably, the heroes in all the four narratives are on the brink of change. Rama has been exiled; the knights, despite knowing the difficulties surrounding the exact location of the chalice, are prepared to encounter one impediment after another; Sindbad, like Ulysses never tires of undertaking another adventure after one is over and Sisyphus carries on his dreaded punishment with utmost sincerity without contemplating upon the apparent futility of the task allotted. Accordingly, we can deduce some defining features of such archetypes in world literature. And the first among these is being **dynamic** in nature. Moreover, the ‘Quest’ motif carries a ‘symbolic’ interpretation. It is a process of discovery in which the heroes learn essential truths about themselves, their society and the nature of existence. The rigours of the journey (exile) that Rama undertakes, the trials and tortures that the knights, Sindbad and Sisyphus must undergo are a sign that these truths are very difficult to face, not simply because they are painful in themselves, but also because accepting them requires that the individuals rid themselves of the familiar, old-fashioned conventions, values and self-images. Rama transcends the stereotyped image of a prince who lives for self-glorification. Galahad, Sindbad and Ulysses too reject a static unadventurous life. In other words, they annihilate their old selves to give birth to a new self-image. In this sense, all the four stories are stories of **initiation**.

Again, the journey that these heroes undertake, gives them the much-needed **knowledge of self-realization**. And hence the process of the ‘Quest’ is important. On occasions, they may be forced to face hard facts about their place in a culture or in the world at large. At other times, the protagonists gain insight into vital areas of their own natures. The ‘Quest’ is a psychological journey – a descent into the dark unmapped regions of the hero’s heart and soul, where the dragons and demons must be faced and overcome, for they are embodiments of their own weaknesses, limitations and fears. Thus, in a larger sense, these **roads of trials** always lead to illumination of character. Rama as we know gets transformed into *Maryaadaa purshottam Rama*. Ulysses’s character undergoes a transcendental somersault when he says about his son Telemachus that *He works his work, I mine*. And all the Knights – Perceval to

Galahad, Sindbad and Sisyphus exemplify the never die spirit of work. They carry an unquenchable craving and the power to invent endless variations on a single theme.

Thus, the 'Quest' archetype in myth and literature symbolizes the absolute necessity of radical, defiant, creative change in an individual's life or in the life of any culture – be it Eastern or Western. Archetypal characters must alter and grow physically, emotionally, psychically and spiritually. The 'Quest' cannot be stopped. And the heroes learn to accept the truth that life is perpetually in a state of flux. They learn that life is an unending cycle of births and deaths, a disposal of things that were meaningful yesterday for those that assume new significance as the future unfolds. Rama's, Arthur's, Sindbad's and Sisyphus's willingness to undertake the 'Quest' is a sign that they understand and accept dynamism in life. They know that to be static means to be dead. Conclusively, one can theorize that as the 'Quest' motif transcends the disciplines of religion, history, myth and literature, it is imperative for man to **think** across disciplines and thereby understand the profound principle of unity in diversity.

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