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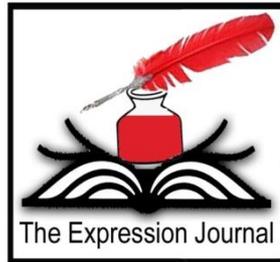
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CONFLUENCE OF ARCHETYPAL AND ECOLOGICAL: A READING OF RANJIT LAL'S *THE SMALL TIGERS OF SHERGARH*

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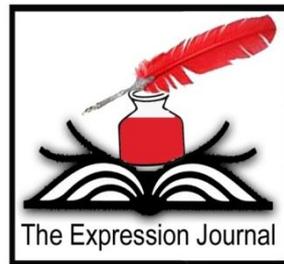
Abstract

Indian Literature is replete with diverse mythological stories and archetypes that demonstrate man's innate trust in the unseen and the intangible. These myths and archetypes are enriching reservoirs to gauge man's inner conflicts, fears, desires, apprehensions and primeval instincts. Although man erected boundaries and opted a piecemeal approach to categorize Homo sapiens, archetypes bind the members of the human species by emphasizing the inherited universal ideas, behavioral patterns, thoughts and images which are stored in the unconscious realm of individuals. This research article titled "Confluence of Archetypal and Ecological: A Reading of Ranjit Lal's *The Small Tigers of Shergarh*" attempts to interpret the novel in the light of archetypal approach by unraveling the archetypal implications and further illustrate the lasting ecological concerns embedded within the archetypes.

Keywords

Archetypes, Monomyth, Ecology, Collective Unconscious, Sustainability,
Stewardship, Nonhuman, Custodian.

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CONFLUENCE OF ARCHETYPAL AND ECOLOGICAL: A READING OF RANJIT LAL'S *THE SMALL TIGERS OF SHERGARH*

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The gamut of Indian Literature is replete with diverse mythological stories and archetypes that demonstrate man's innate trust in the unseen and the intangible. As these myths and archetypes are dynamic, they (re)shape man's mental and spiritual domains to a greater extent that he finds the abstract more concrete, sublime and inexhaustible. Myths and archetypes act as enriching reservoirs to gauge man's inner conflicts, fears, desires, apprehensions including primeval instincts. Northrop Frye, Canadian mythologist and literary theorist, challenged the tenets of the New Critics and emphasized the significance of myths and archetypes in literary works of art. He affirmed that myths are fundamentally informing agents contained in a work of art and they evince multiple archetypal patterns.

According to Carl Gustav Jung, Swiss psychiatrist and psycho analyst, archetypes or prototypes are universal symbols and images that stem from the collective unconscious. Irrespective of the various socio-cultural differences, human beings have inherited universal ideas, behavioral patterns, thoughts and images which are stored in the unconscious realm of the individuals. The ability to interpret such myths and archetypes enhance readers' perception of the literary works of art.

The study of myths and archetypes continue to fascinate and enlighten us even in the postmodern scenario where rigid boundaries are dissolved in order to deliberately conflate incompatible aspects in order to facilitate multifarious perspectives. As these myths decode human disposition and desires that are implanted in the inner recesses of the human mind, they catapult the attention of writers and literary critics for whom profound human emotions as well as intellectual responses function as instructive agents in the process of the creation of works of art. Samuel A. Eisenstein declares in "Literature and Myth", "But missiles as well as passenger jets link the continents, and a worldwide insecurity has awakened the myth-making power and myth-believing credulity of the whole race" (372).

If archetypal criticism engages the readers' attention to stories and cultural / psychological archetypal patterns in gauging the literary merit of the texts, ecocriticism strives to re-evaluate the long-cherished anthropocentric views and asserts the dire need to examine

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the human-nonhuman bond which is supposedly primeval. The United Nations' endeavour to create a healthy planet by adopting sustainably development measures based on an inclusionary model has catapulted the attention of global stakeholders from multidisciplinary academic forums. The earnest effort to augment sustainability and development is assuming titanic shapes in all spheres of the academia as the principles of SD perceptibly chalk out the need to (re)establish a thriving and peaceful human community.

The kaleidoscopic world of Indian literature has been consistently sensitizing readers on the inseparable relationship between the human community and its immediate bio-diversified environment. Of the galaxy of contemporary Indian writers of fiction, Ranjit Lal commands exceptional readership not only with his literary and creative acumen but also as journalist, photographer, environmentalist and ornithologist. Having penned around 45 books, Lal is a recipient of the ZEISS Wildlife Lifetime Conservation Award 2019. As a writer of fiction and non-fiction, Ranjit Lal is an acknowledged producer of Children's literature. He bagged the Crossword Award for Children's Writing for *Faces in the Water* (2010) and *Our Nana was a Nutcase* (2015). The objective of this research article titled "Confluence of Archetypal and Ecological: A Reading of Ranjit Lal's *The Small Tigers of Shergarh*" attempts to interpret the novel in the light of archetypal approach by studying the archetypal implications and further illustrate how lasting ecological concerns are embedded within the archetypes.

Abandoned by the infelicitous death of the parents in a horrifying car accident, the fourteen-year old protagonist, Shikha Saini, and her five-year old 'baby brother' Sunny find providential care and concern in Binoy chacha who offers immediate medical attention. He soon decides to take the children to Shergarh House 1923 with the hope that a change of place might help them recuperate from their traumatic condition. The rest of the novel is a graphic description of Shikha's journey into the Tiger Reserve of Shergarh. Although the protagonist is not endowed with extraordinary traits of a Hero, Shikha's story as presented in the novel can be interpreted using the Monomyth or the narrative blueprint of Joseph Campbell as explained in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2008).

Drawing inspiration from Carl Jung's theories on analytical psychology, Joseph Campbell evinced interest in unraveling the obscurities entrenched in the alcoves of the human mind. Campbell believed that these indicators have to be decoded to understand that individual human experiences belong to the composite psychic unity of mankind, and hence a universal archetypal domain exists from where the innumerable individual patterns emanate. Campbell's notion of the Monomyth emphasizes the prevalence of a basic pattern in which the Hero's journey is discussed in detail. Accordingly, the archetypal Hero is subject to a three-phase journey – of separation, initiation and return. This formula finds relevance in the life of Ranjit Lal's heroine, Shikha Saini. Shikha may not assume the grandeur of an ideal Hero but her predicament dramatizes the physical and spiritual ordeal of a modern girl who finds liberation and empowerment in the end.

Owing to the heartbreaking death of her parents, Shikha and her brother are dislodged from their home and brought to the Tiger Reserve. This relocation from the known world into the unknown marks the genesis of Shikha's first phase of the journey. Shikha understands that destiny compels her to recover with renewed strength and arm herself to overcome physical as well as emotional challenges. She accepts the new role as mother and nurse to her brother Sunny who lost his ability to speak on the wretched day of his parents' death. When the young heroine dares to journey through this intimidating and demanding phase, as Campbell rightly observed, there is "a majestic representation of the difficulties of the hero-task, and of its

sublime import” which is “profoundly conceived and solemnly undertaken” (24). The greatness of the hero undertaking his strenuous journey is not only presented in traditional legends but also discussed in the contemporary modern civilization. The children’s entry into the Shergarh House becomes a defining moment as they get acquainted to Aslambhai, a retired forest guard and Ali, his grandson, Sharifa, the genial wife of Aslambhai, Mr. Rana, the field director, his wife Joginder and Dipti, daughter of Mr. Rana – who create an agreeable ambiance for Shikha and Sunny to surmount their emotional struggle.

The commencement of the next phase of Shikha’s journey begins on reaching the Shergarh House which is nestled at the edge of a slope. The young girl becomes conscious of the uncanny ambiance, unlike her luxurious home in Delhi, in which she finds herself for the first time. Shikha continues to observe the topography - an unkempt garden, a rocky ridge, Shergarh Kila, the fort and the elegant Chhota Mahal. The Shergarh that lies over the hills in a large valley renders an enthralling beauty of the landscape, and the novelist observes that the inexorable tranquility transported Shikha into a verdant setting: “Shikha gasped in awe. The view was stunning” (Lal 13). This unexpected move to a different world of irresistible grandeur and solace is not only physical, but also psychological and spiritual. An inward journey begins, and the young protagonist is prepared for a psycho-spiritual metamorphosis. Embedded in the narratives of Shikha’s life-changing experiences is the novelist’s dedicated call to affirm humanity’s moral obligation towards ecological concerns. The novel makes a strong ecological inquiry and this marks the confluence of the archetypal and the ecological aspects. The little world of Shergarh becomes an epitome of the massive Ecospace, a bio-diverse topography which commands a legitimate share on Earth. Shikha’s interior journey towards self-exploration and her exterior jungle safaris render a novel dimension of the amalgamation of archetypal and ecological perspectives manifested in the text.

The ‘honorary wildlife warden’ and tracker, Aslambhai, is the mentor archetype who initiates Shikha’s trips into the Shergarh Reserve. He is the dependable veteran whose undying support throughout the journeys, wise counsel and knowledge of the interior contours of the Shergarh Reserve embolden Shikha to desire for more trips into the jungle. Her adventurous safaris amend her traumatic past and alter her perspective towards the external world of reality. The mesmerizing Shergarh forest with its biologically diverse community of plant life and wildlife, Hari Pani, the emerald green water hole, legendary Shergarh Fort, Chhota Mahal, animal caves, and the stately appearance of Shahenshah, the Tiger of tigers – create a new world for Shikha. This phenomenal change into an enterprising landscape, which implies the intangible psychic space too, of peace and serenity facilitates the process of self-discovery. The resurgence of inner peace propels Shikha to comprehend the profound abundance of the jungle. Shikha’s aesthetic raptures symbolize utmost freedom and emission of primeval energy to exercise her spirit of volition. It is in the inside of the forest of Shergarh that Shikha discovers her inherent strength and aligns herself with the insurmountable vitality of Nature. The archetypal pattern of Nature rendering motherly protection and security is a recognized happening in many literary texts. Another added feature is the spiritual import which is inextricably involved in the discussions on the nexus between human and nonhuman world.

The first few chapters of the novel are mesmerizing descriptions of the physical beauty of Shergarh. The impeccable nonhuman world of Shergarh entices Shikha with the thrill of adventure. As the journey begins through the meandering path, Aslambhai enlightens Shikha on the wildlife species in the forest. The little girl understands that the Shergarh holds a bio-diverse world unlike the din and bustle of a metropolis. Aslambhai’s Gypsy moves towards

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Shergarh Kila which houses the massive peepul and banyan trees whose roots have ravaged the granite and the “many mossy niches and nooks, and steps leading down into mysterious depths, through which greenery exploded upwards” (Lal 23). Amidst the dilapidated setting, the trees and plants in their uncultivated habitat embody the plenitude of the ecosystem and its doggedness to find ways for sustenance and survival. As Shikha journeys into the heart of the jungle, she observes the threshold of a new world unraveling its glorious splendour.

The abandoned Chhota Mahal, another milestone in the history of Shergarh Tiger Reserve, draws the attention of the readers with its historical significance. In the past, the Mahal had been a place for many princes and princesses who used to watch tiger hunts. The Chhota Mahal continues to narrate the human savagery evident in illegal hunting and abuse of tigers in the jungle: “Beaters would drive the tigers through the jungle on three sides into the clearing. The elephants with the hunters on the machans would be waiting on the fourth side. The tigers would be driven towards the elephant, through the open ground and shot. Or they would tie a bait in the clearing and wait for the tiger to come” (Lal 24-25). The brief sojourn into the past and the poachers’ episode in the end of the novel highlight Ranjit Lal’s critique of the heartless exploitative human ventures that ravage the pristine environment. As observed by Huggan and Tiffin, the “Contemporary humanity, having materially destroyed vast areas of wilderness – and many other animals – is now routinely configured as spiritually hollow, as lacking the essence of the human” (134). On the other hand, Shikha experiences “a sense of peace seeping into her, like sap in a tree bark. This world was so different from the one she had known. For a brief instant, it even made her forget what had happened to mama and papa and Sunny” (25). The novelist records a palpable change in Shikha’s attitude towards life. In the abundance of the Shergarh forest, Shikha discerns the spiritual connection between human beings and their environment. A sudden realization of this unalterable truth helps Shikha transcend the evanescent secular affairs and yearn for a magical communion with the nonhuman world.

One of Shikha’s unforgettable excursions into the forest is the visit to Hari Pani, a forest waterhole. Surrounded by huge trees, the waterhole contains emerald green water which narrates the legend of a Maharani of Shergarh who hurled her collection of emeralds into the pool when Shergarh was assaulted by the enemies. The Maharani’s decision to get rid of her materialistic possessions in order to protect the kingdom recounts the cultural practices and beliefs of the past. In one of the trips, Shikha and her brother express their uncompromising desire to plunge into the waters of Hari Pani. Aslambhai observes the two children feeling refreshed and revitalized as they swim in the pool and describes them as ‘the small tigers of Shergarh’: “For the small tigers of Shergarh, and especially for Shikha, that first swim in Hari Pani was sheer heaven. The water was blissfully cool, the eternally bubbling springs in its depths ensuring that it never got rank or mouldy” (226). Having deprived of their parental love, the two children enjoy the bliss of maternal love and security in the springs of Hari Pani. The water renders a ceremonious purgation of their traumatic experience and ascertains a vicarious plunge into the moorings of womb. Ranjit Lal describes that “Shikha had been attracted to the place ever since their first visit there with Dipti. Its deep green waters and dramatic ochre cliff faces, its steep ravines with their rugged date palms and giant bamboo clumps, somehow soothed and calmed her, it brought a serenity to her eyes” (Lal 112).

The pinnacle of Shikha’s motley of experiences is the epic moment of meeting Shahenshah, Tiger of tigers in Shergarh. She finds the colossal beast at a close quarter. The tiger gazes at her and moves away undisturbed as though the machismo in the tiger is subdued

by the equal and opposite marianismo as personified in Shikha. The readers are left to surmise if the animal represents the unconscious masculine element of Shikha. The stunning emergence of Shahenshah and its hasty disappearance leaves the girl spellbound. The tiger's breath, agile muscles, elegant yellow coat, swinging tail and the royal bearing create indelible impressions in her mind: "Surely no one could feel greater than what she was feeling at the moment: to have been able to share a private moment with a wild tiger in the jungle!" (42).

Shikha's escalating desire to meet Shahenshah and other tigers of the jungle is kindled on listening to an interesting legend of the maharaja of Shergarh and his queen who were blessed with a royal heir after many years of conjugal bliss. The maharaja decided to celebrate the birth of his son by conducting tiger hunts. This insensible decision resulted in the wanton destruction of the tiger species and the baffling disappearance of other animals. The trees withered and the water holes dried up. An ecological pandemonium broke out in the form of flash floods, drought and starvation of cattle and people. The condition worsened when the royal successor fell sick, and the maharaja brought a tiger cub on the advice of a holy man. The Rajkumar began to recover after some time and he grew fond of the pet cub. On observing the bond between his son and the beast, the maharaja decreed to stop tiger hunts in the empire. Shergarh became the 'fort of the tiger'. However, the enemies from the neighbouring kingdoms defeated the maharaja, threatened the Prince to kill his own mother and the pet tiger. The legend recounts of how a huge tiger ravaged the conspirators and protected the kingdom of Shergarh. The myth of the appearance of the Rajkumar and his tiger (Badshah) during crises began to haunt the minds of the people in Shergarh.

This legend fascinates Shikha and providence bestows her the chance to meet other members of the species. Dipti, Mr. Rana's daughter, inspires Shikha to document her safari experiences in the form of notes and photographs. Aslambhai's meticulous description of the Shergarh landscape, his skill in identifying pugmarks, bird-calls, foreseeing storms and his experiential conjectures of animal behaviour awaken Shikha's interest and curiosity to learn more about the Shergarh forest. As days roll away, Shikha learns about Sheba, Shahenshah's beloved and the empress in the kingdom of Shergarh, Begum, Sheba's sister and Shaitan, the ferocious attacker and Shahenshah's rival. The ambush of tigers, its natural habitat and their mode of establishing identity and domain enralls the little girl. Shikha, specifically, monitors the macho virility in Shahenshah and the gentle docility in Sheba who is otherwise ferocious and aggressive. Even among the animal kingdom, the presence of a palpable hierarchy of culture or structure implies not only the rift between the powerful and the weak but also the interconnectedness between the domineering masculine (Shahenshah) and the acquiescent feminine (Sheba) which ensures the genetic continuity.

Another moment of revelation for Shikha is her understanding of the animals' struggle for food and survival evinced in the battle between the higher and the lower animals. Sheba's intense rage in attacking its prey, the novelist observes, is fleeting and whimsical: "A despairing bleat from the chital...and then just the cacophony of the surrounding jungle as peacocks and langurs and lapwings sounded the alarm, too late at least for one unfortunate chital" (Lal 115). Nevertheless, as soon as the animal's hunger is satisfied, Sheba shares her prey with the other small animals, birds, flies and butterflies. The ontological fact is that the Shergarh forest renders space for the diverse living organisms to co-exist and procreate through mutual dependence as well as by preying on other living creatures. This symbiotic relationship among the living things emphasizes an ecological order for sustainable development, and is indicative of the innate urge among the animal species to establish their order of identities. Paradoxically,

the pristine environmental network collapses owing to numerous anthropogenic activities. Shikha ponders upon this truth:

It's peaceful and beautiful. I feel calm inside, not upset and worried. And everything seems to know what it has to do. I mean all the creatures go on with what they have to do without really getting into each other's way. Sometimes they do, but then they just butt one another politely and get on with things. Not like us, always interfering with one another unnecessarily and getting all upset. (119)

The novel lends itself to unravel the archetypal conflict between the good and the evil. The arrival of Veena aunty, a.k.a. Snail Snot, a bad-tempered and deceitful woman, and her bad influence over Binoy chacha spoils the harmony in the family. Veena aunty is unduly critical of the children's upbringing, their peculiar interests including their craving for tiger safaris, and reiterates the need to reform them. Besides creating confusion inside the Shergarh House, Veena aunty misguides the naïve villagers with the intention of dismantling Shergarh Reserve. Her prejudices against wild animals are incompatible to the interests of Shikha, Mr. Rana, Dipti and Aslambhai who value the aesthetic beauty of the forest as well as interested in conserving wildlife. Veena aunty and her accomplices assert human authority over the nonhuman world by indulging in animal exploitation. They represent the hostile forces which promote anthropocentric ideals that extirpate the agency of the Other (nonhuman realm).

Veena aunty's hidden agenda to separate Shikha and her brother by sending the girl to Paradise Valley Boarding School and the boy to a Special school for learning speech therapy techniques showcases her untenable hatred towards the two innocent children. Although Shikha expresses her disinclination, Veena aunty plots to drug the children and to abduct Sunny. It is an archetypal pattern that the evil, however diabolic, would be defeated by the good. In the most crucial moment, Shikha learns about the wicked plan and plans to flee into the jungle. After travelling through the swampy forest floor in a gypsy, Shikha and Sunny find refuge in a dark cave near Hari Pani. The dark forest provides a natural hideout for the children and the wild atmosphere rejuvenates her instinct for survival. It is a belief that "the tiger symbolizes the drowning of consciousness in the unleashing of a flood of elemental desires" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1008). Amidst the frightening dense forest, the thought of the unyielding splendour of the Shergarh tigers instills in her the courage to discern her dormant potentials, vigour and resilience in times of challenging situations. They get manifested in her bravado in riding the gypsy through the forest with her drugged brother. This episode is indicative of Shikha's urge for self-discovery and her undying faith in the spiritual might of the Shergarh forest that would protect her from the forces of evil incarnate in human form. Fortune brings Ali to Shikha's support and the dramatic rift between good and bad ends in the triumph of good.

Veena aunty's nefarious plans are thwarted and the poachers' jeep carrying the hide of tigers is discovered. The pinnacle of the good-bad conflict is the magical revival of Sunny's ability to speak on seeing Shararat and Shaan, the cubs of Sheba, making their charismatic presence from the caves. This incident exemplifies Campbell's observation of the daunting and overwhelming situations into which the Hero would be placed, and the ensuing supernatural forces that come to his rescue. In the subsequent pages of the novel, the readers are made to understand how the pursuers get caught inside a bamboo grove where a woody vine on the forest floor entangles the poachers while Veena aunty remains imprisoned inside the poachers' jeep on the unexpected arrival of a tiger. A long jail term is declared for the poachers while Veena aunty is destined to suffer from an incorrigible mental trauma.

As it is common among the archetypal narratives, the adventures of Shikha receive wide audience and the novel ends with Shikha's renewed journey into the Shergarh jungle. The varied experience inside the jungle transforms the heroine and emboldens her to become a steward of the Reserve. The novel announces the herald of a new generation, Shikha and her friends, of supporters and collaborators who would take up the mantle of leadership to preserve the Shergarh Reserve. In the end of the novel, Shikha completes her heroic ordeal in an unknown territory and renews her strength to chisel a path towards self-assertion and self-dignity. The outcome or the culmination of the arduous journey of Shikha "is the unlocking and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world" (Campbell 32) and this flow gets manifested in Shikha's future journeys into the forest. In her extraordinary reentry into the Shergarh forest, Shikha evinces the transformative phase and stands as the novelist's mouthpiece to declare the message of becoming the custodian of the environment. As recommended, "The idea of stewardship calls on humans to nurture and protect God's creation and not to destroy it...Humans have dominion over the world but are not entitled to destroy or ruin it. Dominion is not domination. This stewardship tradition would be sympathetic to conservation of natural resources and sustainable economic development" (Desjardins 43).

In his review of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, H. R. Ellis Davidson rightly remarked that:

In our own age the long inherited universe of symbols has collapsed, and we are in desperate need of a new hero who can bring to light 'the lost Atlantis of the coordinated Soul'. Since the old mysteries of the great wild beasts, the wonders of sun and stars and the changing year have lost their force, we will need to discover new ones, based on the depths of the human mind. The problem is as acute now as when the author propounded it twenty years ago. (157)

As a modern heroine, Shikha undergoes her archetypal journey and embedded within her weird experiences is the call for commitment and moral concern towards ecological wellbeing. In exploring her inward journey, the writer deftly presents the interrelationship between archetypal patterns and ecological concerns.

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