

The Wanderer: A Deconstructive Study of Kahlil Gibran's "The Quest"

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Abstract:

The divine truth is revealed only to certain wanderers across time, who deliberately or transparently travel upon the path of spiritualism to seek their inner being. One of the key figures and spiritualists of romantic period is a Lebanese-American visual artist—a poet, prophet and a divine philosopher, above all a saint, “Kahlil Gibran”. He was one of the most known poets across the world for his incomparable prophetic writings, noble diction and personification. The gold-edged papers, or gilt-edged pages of *The Prophet*, signifies that the content is timeless or highly valuable, making it popular for spiritualism. Gibran’s oeuvre, still resonates eternal truth like a lotus of countless petals and explores different literary forms like poetry, parables, political essays, aphorisms, short stories, fables and letters. “The Quest” is one of the many parables of *The Wanderer* — two philosophers, while peregrination, met at a slope of Lebanon, interestingly both of them were seeking their contrasting modes of inquiry, meanwhile; rhetorically, they were enlightened by a stranger, “that they both are dwelling within them and there is nothing outside of them”, in other words, “There is nothing outside of text”—within this framework of deconstructive study, the parable, “The Quest” is woven by the threads of spiritual quest, mysticism, non-dualism and irony, thus, these two wanderers’ eternal search of truth or meaning depicts a deconstructive reader to divulge those paradoxical state of affairs, knit within the text itself.

Key words: Deconstruction. Philosopher. Spiritualism. The Quest. Wanderer.

1.Introduction:

In *The Prophet*, Kahlil Gibran states, It is life in quest of life in bodies that fear the grave (Gibran 62). “The Quest” — the futility of endless seeking is portrayed as both, the noble search of divinity and absurd action to reach it. “The ultimate logic of deconstructive criticism implies a paradoxical state of affairs” (Cuddon 510). Paradox, *The Quest* refers, “life” itself is in quest of its own true identity and recognition, further, “life” is not just a biographical existence, but a deeper spiritual vitality, constantly seeking its whole being, on the other hand because of lacking the divine guidance, throughout life, human beings are trapped in the physical body, they are fearful of death, hence, the true essence of ‘life’ is beyond the physical body which is totally untouched by death. Only body rests in the grave and soul remains eternal to travel across time, therefore, body is an instrument and soul is the seeker or wanderer of solitude. Kahlil Gibran is compared with, the Persian philosopher Ghazali and St. Augustine who were the famous

Roman theologian of eleventh century who claims that “self” is a divine wanderer/wonderer, travels “from reason to philosophy and then to the godlike self” (Deshmukh 103).

Gibran romanticises God as Nature in *Fear, It's not about disappearing into the ocean, but becoming the ocean* (Lines 18-19). The richness of Gibran's writings adore NATURE as a source of spiritual wisdom like “The British Romantics”, at the same time, he was deeply influenced by the philosophical movement of “American Transcendentalism”, associated with thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, thus, Gibran's works trace the emotional and imaginative qualities of British romanticism and spiritual quest of American transcendentalism.

2. Deconstruction: A Reading

“A deconstructive reading is a reading which analyses the specificity of a text's critical difference from itself” (Cuddon 189). According to Paul De Man, “The text is self-deconstructive where the literal level is subverted by figural. This makes all texts undecidable in their meaning” (Nayar 45). “For Paul de man, deconstruction is the critical project par excellence, the determination (as in determination) that no text can escape” (Nealon 1271). Deconstructionists question the unity of language and determination of ‘deconstructive reader’ is to produces meanings rather than protect authorial intention, at the same time, deconstructive reader is neither subjective not objective, neither in the favour of author nor him/herself but faithfully responsible toward textual intention only, hence, the approach of deconstruction might be different between deconstructionists even between the deconstructive readers. In short, the deconstructive reader carries a responsibility to analyse, evaluate and read between the lines of particular work of art to fill up the gaps within the text itself, and to reveals those meanings, about which the author might be unaware. Thus, a deconstructive reader reveals the hidden, supressed and marginalised voice between the author and text. “The deconstructive reader responses by probing the “depths” of the text, in search of that thread which, whether hidden, suppressed, marginalized, or readily apparent” (Trivedi and Raval 1008).

While “Gasche argues that Derrida's thought has been grossly misrepresented by its American disciples and that there has never been a properly deconstructive criticism in America; in fact, Gasche asserts that there is nothing inherent in Derrida's work that makes it applicable in any simple way to literary criticism” (Nealon 1267). Both Nealon and Gasche represent contrasting modes of inquiry of deconstruction, may be due to the complexness of Derridean discourses. Meanwhile, “For de Man, deconstruction is a generalizable method that can be applied to all writing; it will yield similarly indeterminate results in any (con)text” (Nealon 1271).

3. A Deconstructive Study of The Quest

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes, “The text has no stable identity, no stable origin, no stable end” (Of Grammatology xii). The text is always in *The Quest*— therefore deconstruction indicates a particular kind of practice or approach of reading the text, and thereby, a linguistic method of criticism and mode of analytical inquiry within the discipline of theoretical framework.

3.1 The Quest

“A thousand years ago two philosophers met on a slope of Lebanon, and one said to the other, “Where goest thou?” (Gibran 119). Two philosophers/wanderers are in search or quest of their contrasting

modes of inquiry. “And the other answered, “I am seeking after the fountain of youth which I know wells out among these hills. I have found writings which tell of that fountain flowering toward the sun. And you, what are you seeking?” The first man answered, “I am seeking after the mystery of death” (Gibran 119). One philosopher, who has read somewhere and therefore he seeks “the fountain of youth”, which is flowering toward the sun, at the same time, the other philosopher seeks the “mystery of death”. While The Farewell of Al Mustafa, Gibran reminds that the glory of youth decreases, you have given me my deeper thirsting after life. Surely there is no greater gift to a man than that which turns all his aims into parching lips and all life into a fountain. And in this lies my honour and my reward, –That whatever I come to the fountain to drink I find the living water itself thirsty; And it drinks me while I drink it (The Prophet 63). Philosophically, Gibran dramatizes tension between “glory of youth and mystery of death”—in *On Death*, Gibran asks, For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun? (57). Through the mouth of Yusif EI Fakhri, *Between Night and Morn*, the short essay on *The Tempest*. Thus, spoke Gibran: “Yusif says, I came to this far corner of God’s domain for I hungered to learn the secrets of the Universe, and approach close to the throne of God” (403).

Then each of the two philosophers conceived that the other was lacking in his great science, and they began to wrangle, and to accuse each other of spiritual blindness (Gibran 119). “Aporia—an insuperable deadlock, or “double bind,” of incompatible or contradictory meanings which are “undecidable” in that we lack any sufficient ground for choosing among them” (Abrams and Harpham 83). Ironically, if language of philosophers is complicated to understand for common man, then the philosophy of language is ambiguous for philosophers too, because, language is not innocent. “A third operation is his analysis of the inherent nonlogicality, or “rhetoricity”—that is, the inescapable reliance on rhetorical figures and figurative language— in all uses of language, including in what philosophers have traditionally claimed to be the strictly literal and logical arguments of philosophy” (Abrams and Harpham 82). Whatever exist upon this universe can be question, then why not the system of language, even the centre of philosophy and ideas of philosophers? “Deconstruction has two aspects such as literary and philosophical. The first one concerned on finding out the hidden meaning of the texts in terms of ‘critical analysis of the text’, while the second one focused on breaking or demolishing the hierarchy or dichotomy that privileges one idea over another, one concept over another, one philosophy over another and so on” (Sahu et al. 101).

“Now while the two philosophers were loud upon the wind, a stranger, a man who was deemed a simpleton in his own village, and passed by, and when he heard the two in hot dispute, he stood a while and listened to their argument” (Gibran 119). Many people must have passed by them, who haven’t taken a moment to stop for a while, they might be disinterested in the wanderer’s quest, but a stranger! why did he stand a while? “If philosophy is taken to be a pure disinterested search for knowledge, it is understood not to have an ulterior purpose, but to be a quest undertaken for its own sake” (Mautner 466). Now the story takes a turn, the wanderer’s quest becomes the quest for deconstructive readers; who was that stranger?—the wonderer, the prophet, the philosopher, the poet, the mystic, the saint or Gibran himself as a stranger reflecting his own preaching to “touch the feet of truth”, and how modestly he could answer? in fact, he was blessed to preach the language of soul, who claims, “I heard the teaching of Confucius, I listened to Brahma’s wisdom; I sat by Buddha under the tree of knowledge” (Song of Man 375). “The Divine Philosopher” is ‘one’ and his philosophy across the globe is one, he belongs to no religion and at

the same time he belongs to all the religions. “He is the prophet unseen because clothed in tomorrow’s attire while his nation is clothed in the attire of yesterday” (Nealon 490). “Typically, a deconstructive reading sets out to show that conflict forces within the text itself serve to dissipate the seeming definiteness of its structure and meanings into an indefinite array of incompatible and undecidable possibilities” (Abrams and Harpham 82-83).

“For deconstruction and poststructuralism, the notion of binary opposition is unsatisfactory because it represents a nostalgia for ‘self- presence’ or ‘centring’” (Cuddon 77-78). “Binary opposition”—a stranger as knower and two philosophers as wanderers decentralise the binary, “knower” and “seeker”, even Knower himself by awakening spiritualism in oneness (atman). In *The Prophet*, at *The Farewell*, “Almitra the seeress said, “Blessed be this day and this place and your spirit that has spoken” (Gibran 59). Then, Al Mustafa answers, “What it I who spoke? Was I not also a listener?” (59).

Language has been governed by binary opposition since the classical philosophy to structuralism; deconstruction radically oppose to follow the footsteps of Plato, therefore the intention behind deconstructive reading is to decentralise those binaries where literature opens the textuality itself where text is not bind by any kind of intensive rules. Spivak writes “And the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patters of the language that he uses. This relationship is not a certain qualitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or of force, but a signifying structure that critical reading should produce” (Of Grammatology 158).

“Then he came near to them and said, “My good men. It seems that you both really belong to the same school of philosophy, and that you both are speaking of the same thing, only you speak in different words. One of you is seeks the fountain of youth, and the other seeks the mystery of death. Yet indeed they are but one, and as they dwell in you both” (Gibran 119). “Unknowingly, both philosophers were speaking the same thing in different words”. Stranger’s reply is woven by the threads of spiritual quest, mysticism, non-dualism and irony. “Gibran’s writings often convey a sense of wonder and awe at the beauty and complexity of the universe, inviting readers to contemplate the interconnectedness of all things and the presence of a higher power that transcends human understanding” (Anjun 96). Romantics’ love of nature and spiritual quest of American transcendentalism are both mingled in Gibran’s writings like body and soul that assert body as a temple and soul as God. In *The Prophet*, through the mouth of Al Mustafa, Gibran prophesied, Your daily life is your temple and your religion (Gibran 55). Thus, the divine being is within you, not outside of you, therefore do not wander here or there, take a moment to recognize that divine light, as Gautam Buddha’s last words indicate “अप्य दीपो भवः”

According to the Sanskrit maxim or most cited aphorism, “यथा पिण्डे तथा ब्रह्माण्डे यथा ब्रह्माण्डे तथा पिण्डे” Yathā piṇḍe tathā brahmāṇḍe, yathā brahmāṇḍe tathā piṇḍe. translated as “As is the microcosm, so is the macrocosm.” A very similar idea appears in Western philosophy through the “microcosm–macrocosm” theory discussed by thinkers like Hermes Trismegistus and later in Hermetic philosophy. (पिण्ड) indicates, the individual body made by five cosmic implements (earth, water, fire, air, ether- तत्त्वज्ञान) and the microcosm indicates Brahmāṇḍa (ब्रह्माण्ड) the universe, so the phrase expresses, the idea that the structure of the human being reflects the structure of the entire universe, what exists in the cosmos also exists within

each individual. “पिण्डे पिण्डे एकः ब्रह्माण्ड अस्ति”. The truth is not outside of the self but within the self — Spivak writes, “There is nothing outside of the text, [there is no outside-text: il n’y a pas de hors-texte]” (Of Grammatology 158). The philosophical roots of wanderers’ quest lead toward Kabir Saheb’s Doha: निज धर्में जो अटल रहे, सो ही साधु सुजान । कहे कबीर वह जानिए, जो जाने आत्मज्ञान ॥ (Bijak). The wise saint is the one who stays firm in their own spiritual path, such a person realizes self-knowledge (आत्मज्ञान). The mind is the reflection of cosmic consciousness, therefore understanding oneself (निजसार/निजधर्म) can lead to understand the universe/universes. “Gibran deplores the lack of spirituality in modern society as a result of its materialistic nature, oppressive man-made laws, and institutionalized religion that prevents individual’s realization or experience of God. This forces the seekers of truth to leave the society and seek God in solitude” (Madhava Rao Kaniganti 777).

Each society carries its own rules and regulation, which create hurdles in the path of an individualist, no one can escape by the conspiracy of this society, but one can definitely remain untouched like a lotus in the mud. At the very beginning of the essay, Self-Reliance, Emerson states via the Latin epigraph, “Ne te quaesiveris extra” (145). That means “Do not seek yourself outside yourself”. Similar spiritual aura glimpses in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore and Gibran, both often connect self-realization with self - awakening (आत्म जागरण), inner - knowledge (आत्मज्ञान) uplifts the devotee to divine knowledge (ब्रह्मज्ञान). The fifteenth century’s Adi Kavi of Gujarati language, Narsinh Mehta states, “જીતી લગી આત્માતત્વ ચીંચ્યો નહીં, ત્યાં લગી સાધના સર્વ જુઠી” (શબ્દવેદ ૩૩૫)

“Then the stranger turned away saying, “Farewell sages.” And as he departed, he laughed a patient laughter” (Gibran 119). “Farewell sages”— The stranger’s ‘patient laughter’ is not mocking or cruel, interestingly, it is a verbal language, suggesting a calm, understanding laughter—because he is seeing a truth that both philosophers’ “quest” is not opposite to each other, but they are too blinded by pride to notice it. Each one of both believes that his own quest is superior, while the stranger is aware that both are seeking for the same mystery of entity. In an absolute sense, youth and death are not opposite to each other, they are inseparable parts on life. “Processions, Gibran’s long poem in Arabic, is a dialogue between two voices, upon close analysis, two voices seem to belong to one and the same man: another of those Gibranian Madmen, or men who have become Gods and unto themselves” (Naimy 62).

“The two philosophers looked at each other in silence for a moment, and then they laughed also” (Gibran 119). Their laughter indicates that they finally understood, what Kabir Saheb states in Bijak, If I say one, it isn’t so. If I say two, it’s slander (23). Gibran asserts, life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one (The Prophet 57). In a deconstructive sense, what passage states, what seems opposed—life/death, river/sea—is actually intertwined or interconnected, nothing exists independently, Nagarjun called it, “શુન્યવાદ”. “Gibran believed that men can discover their inherent divine truth and they are capable because they are the spirit of divinity in this world. Like Rumi he believes that true light comes from within, therefore, there is greater power of the soul. The mystical reunion with God brings self-fulfilment” (Deshmukh 106). Human soul is believed to be incomplete when separated from the divine but when an individual reunites spiritually with GOD, he or she realizes true nature of NATURE and discovers what he or she has been searching for along. The mystical reunion with God brings “Self-fulfilment”.

“And one of them said, “Well now, shall we not walk and seek together” (Gibran 119). Both left each other happily. In the ending line of “The Great Sea”, of *The Madman*, Gibran states “Then we left that sea to seek the Greater Sea” (193). Yusif El Fakhri, spoke, “It is an awakening within the spirit; he who know it, is unable to reveal it by words; and he who know it not, will never think upon the compelling and beautiful mystery of existence” (*The Tempest* 407). Spiritual awakening of Yusif describes that the moment when human consciousness suddenly realises or perceives the deeper meaning of life and its connectivity with NATURE, he is unable to explain “Divine Truth”. Language has its own limitations and pure knowledge is unreachable by words thus the highest knowledge is unutterable.

Conclusion:

In a nutshell, the spiritual awakening is the most essential thing in man’s life, and it is the sole purpose of being as the end the progress of the soul will be counted. Kahlil Gibran has portrayed their characters as wanderers, philosophers, even prophets and gods, whose quest followed by the divine solution or the greater sea and they illuminate hearts, enlighten minds and elevate souls to achieve self-fulfilment, the ultimate achievement of peace and serenity. Gibran’s writings reflect, Romantic reverence for nature and Transcendentalist belief in the divine unity between the human soul, nature, and universe. Parable, *The Quest*, mostly suggests the importance of quest rather than any final answer. Gibran uses irony through paradox to acknowledge how two wanderers, despite being philosophers, trapped in their own created abstraction and how patiently they had lightened up by wisdom to search the greater self or the seventh self, through the medium of a stranger.

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