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A Comparative Study of Soul's Alienation in Poe's "The Raven" and Bekes's "The Cemetery of Lanterns"

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Abstract

This study, which compares two poems written in two different languages, focuses on the specific condition of soul's alienation of two selected poets in both American and Kurdish literatures; Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) and Sherko Bekas (1940-2013), in spite of their different religions and ages, their souls' alienation comes as a result of religious, environmental, and personal conditions. The study adapts the American model for comparative literature. It ends up with a succinct conclusion that displays distinct means to draw the condition of soul's alienation that comes as a result of losing faith in God and the negligence of the religious side of life, followed by the list of works cited.

Introduction

One can demonstrate the nature of the American writer, Poe's soul alienation through examining his perspective of Transcendentalism which is a philosophical and literary school that views human being as a victim, entrapped and inflicted by the social evils. For the transcendentalists man is inherently good and capable of performing goodness if he is not plighted with environmental and social disease. The movement emphasizes that " the essential nature of human being is good and that, left in a state of nature, human beings would seek the good,

society is to blame for the corruption that mankind endures" (Yaganeh 2-3). In most of his works, Poe repudiates such an idea, especially in his poem "The Raven" mainly through the setting. In this work the narrator or "I" speaker is isolated from his surrounding but still his soul is suffering from alienation that makes him hallucinate and become insane. It is evident that for such treatment of his subject matter that the transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson criticizes "The Raven" saying, " I see nothing in it" (Weaver 2). Poe's poetry and fiction display

the characteristics of the modern age and its literature, and as Allen Tate says he is "the transitional figure in modern literature because he discovered our great subject, the disintegration of personality" (Regan 174).

For Sherko Bekas, the tyranny and aggression that happened to his country (Kurdistan) and nation (Kurds) in the seventies and eighties of the twentieth century, affects him deeply. He believes that even God does not save his nation, and this makes him lose faith in God and criticize Him for not helping them. As a result, he demonstrates his incredulity in God and lives in an instable situation in Sweden far from his country and isolated from people as he feels a kind of inner alienation (Ahmad 64) which is elucidated plainly in his selected poem for this study.

Ihab Hassan (1925 – 2015) criticizes the comparative literary research, which relies on the principle of 'influence' and 'being influenced' as suggested by the French school of comparison. He prefers the 'Parallel Theory of Comparison' which postulates that there are close relationships between literatures of different nations without paying attention to any mutual influence or direct relation between them. This is due to the fact that the human mind has common ways of responding to experiences, and two authors may have the same cast of minds in different situations or due to different factors (28).

So, the two poets, who are from two different nations, are suffering from the same soul's alienation due to their distance from Divinity that causes their inner devastation.

The Essence and Analysis of the Selected Poems

"The Raven" is a narrative poem that makes use of folk, mythological, religious, and classical references. Poe states that "The Raven" is meant to symbolize "Mournful and never-ending affection on a pallid white bust" (Holt 158) and this "was to create visual contrast against the dark black bird" (Ibid.). It dates from 1844, and

presents a speaker who is physically exhausted under obvious emotional and spiritual strain with an odd prophecy of a man who has 'lost' his love; the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels named Lenore. Far from being a tale of 'horror', a view reinforced by various cinematic representations of the work of Poe, it is a poem of haunting lyric beauty; a poetic portrait of a man in the depths of despair. (Ibid 159).

Bekas started writing his poem "The Cemetery of Lanterns" after the catastrophe of Anfal, which brought a great damage to the soul of the Kurds as the Ba'ath regime buried one hundred and eighty-two thousand Kurds alive. So, the poet loses his confidence in the international power to prohibit Saddam Hussein from annihilating Kurds any more, he accuses God for remaining silent about this, and thus, he becomes deeply incredulous in his spiritual beliefs specifically the religious ones. Bekas portrays his alienated state of soul; he depicts the real scenes of the genocidal act that happened to the Kurds in 1988. All that has led him to lose faith in God and hence to live in a state of soul's alienation and this condition is clearly seen in his collection of poems (Mustafa 154).

As a word 'alienate' simply means "to make sb feel that they do not belong in a particular group" (Oxford 29). This is when someone is alienated, maybe for a short time; however, when the case is related to the soul's alienation, it means that it is deeper and more complicated and the role of time is subordinated. Alienation occurs in various ways or forms, such as the alienation from the society or from the natural surroundings or from God. The third form which is the estrangement of one's self (soul) from God due to losing trust in Him, is the most effective one because "the estrangement from God alienated man from his fellow human beings also. A sense remains with modern man, alienation from his true self, alienation from his fellows, alienation from his world" (Joseph 2).

So, the individual will not be true to the God within the self or a human being in relationship

with others and with his surroundings. In Christian theology alienation is initially occurred through original sin and the fall of human being (Ibid. 1). Thus, soul's alienation is a psychological state with a religious root in which place, time, and people are subordinated. The soul feels lonely even if it is surrounded by people because the human being has lost his relation to God and hence despair creeps to his soul and occupies it. Further, Colin Wilson defines the soul's alienation as a sense of dislocation and non-relation or of being at odds with society due to different reasons (7), among them is the religious one.

To start with the most significant point concerning Poe's poem, its title, one can take it as a clue. The name raven, in most of the cultures, stands for 'ill omens'. It may symbolize death or hardship. Poe's choice of this title is not arbitrary since he declares that every single detail in the poem is employed to suit the three principles of a good writing, length, unity of effect, and method (Guerin 77). Hence the raven embodies the poet's fears and belief that no remedy is on the way to him, which comes from his absurdist view of life and once again because he has lost faith in Divinity.

At the beginning of the poem, Poe describes and establishes the melancholic atmosphere of the speaker's life. He uses words like 'bleak', 'hopeless', and 'dreary' to give the impression that his soul is suffering. He is living alone, isolated from others (Stern 617):

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered,
 weak and weary,
 Over many a quaint and curious volume of
 forgotten lore_
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there
 came a tapping,
As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my
 chamber door,

"T is some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my
 chamber door__
Only this and nothing more."
 (Lines 1-6)

Bekas suffered from the same soul pain when he felt the hopelessness of his nation and their suffering because of that tyranny, he describes his inner anguish at the beginning through the title of the poem (The Cemetery of Lanterns) which shows the burying of lights as a sign of innocent people who were taken to an unknown place to be their graves while their eyes still could see the sun. This is the early picture of surveying that tragedy alongside with his unstable feeling in each line of the collection referring to words like 'anxious, mirage, autumn, ashes', and 'lost'. He states (Latif 72):

I am walking anxiously step by step
 Alongside with the mirage
 Putting hands in hands with Autumn
 Travelling to a city of ashes
Like uneasy bird seeking its lost fledgling
 (P. 4-5: Lines 4-9)

The poet is depressed and his soul is tortured because of the horrifying mass murder of his nation. He is walking with the illusion and puts his hand in the hands of autumn and like a restless bird, he flies to a city full of death and sorrow. It is that pain that makes the poet lose faith in God as a Saver of his nation.

In "The Raven", the source of the tapping is the raven that sits on a bust of Pallas "the Greek goddess of wisdom and the life of learning"(Adams 4), in which Poe says (Sterns 620):

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a
 flirt and flutter
In their stepped a stately Raven of the saintly
 days of yore.

Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute
stopped or stayed he;
But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my
chamber door__
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my
chamber door__
Perched, and sat, and nothing more,
(Lines 37-42)

Hence what the raven says 'Quoth the Raven, nevermore', 'stands for tragedy, death, and the sound of booming gong'(Adams 4). The wisdom that comes from the bird, which reflects Poe's mind, is about the futility of life because the soul is separated from its Creator and is unable to feel and have faith in His existence.

According to the poet's essay 'philosophy of composition' the raven's only response is the truth and the poet's changing mood shows that the soul's alienation and despair are the dominant feelings since the raven "is still sitting on the bust at the end of the poem, and he now has the aspect of a demon. The poet says his soul will never escape the shadow of the raven" (Rogers 68):

"prophet!" said I, "thing of evil! prophet still, if
bird or devil! __
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest
tossed thee here ashore,
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land
enchanted__
On this home by Horror haunted_ tell me truly, I
implore__
Is there__ is there balm in Gilead? __tell me
__tell me, I implore!"
Quote the Raven "Nevermore."
(Lines 85-91)

In the above stanza the speaker asks the raven whether there is an afterlife or not (Fling 3). It is a direct and clear evidence that the speaker does not have any spiritual meditation upon the

religious matters, i.e., he is living in a state of spiritual aridity. The mere question repudiates any belief in the existence of a heavenly cure which means the role of religion is omitted because to believe in God is to believe in His power to cure and solve and to believe in His paradise and hell and hence in the afterlife. Repeatedly, Poe's inner thought and conscience, embodied by the raven on a bust of wisdom, utters the remarkable answer; no cure, no afterlife. He loses his faith in religion.

The same condition might be observed in Bekas's poem but with different reason. He expresses his extreme anger and refuses obeying and listening to God and his Prophet, so the poet rejects his belief in God and clarifies his unstable soul condition that is reflected in his rebellious words which do not suit his culture and religious principles. He is completely protesting when he says (Latif 73):

If Almighty God and Prophet avoid seeing me!
I neither see Him nor listen to Him
When Kurdish virgin girls were in the southern
desert
Waiting for salvation from Him
Nor God neither a hoping light from Him did
glide
(P. 129, lines 3-8).

On the other hand, Poe asks the raven if there is a cure for his melancholy and an end for the suffering of his heart because of the loss of Lenore; here Lenore stands for the loss of the glim of the spiritual enlightenment and purity in addition to some other meanings. She (Leonor) "is not anything like a real person. She's an ideal, a symbol of what the narrator thinks perfect, unspoiled, untouchable women ought to be. To this grief--stricken man, she stops being human and becomes a heavenly saint" (Davison 91). Poe does not give details about Lenore and this ambiguity makes her a symbol; one of the likely symbols that she stands for is the hope for a

better life and an ideal world; however, the hope is answered with 'nevermore' and thus the soul continues to live in its isolation:

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak
December;
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost
upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow;__vainly I had
sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow__sorrow for
the lost Lenore_
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels
name Lenore__
Nameless here for evermore.
(Lines 7-12)

Bekas portrays a female character as Poe's Lenore named Aunt Agee whom he regards as a symbol for the aged, innocent, and helpless women among those in the southern deserts that would be buried alive. The poet addresses Aunt Agee asking her about what she has brought with herself for this journey except some human skin, hair, and old garments as a sign for the calamitous situation. He teasingly asks her about what they have brought as gifts for God after their burying, why crowns of roses have not been brought to God as gratitude to His silence toward the aggression that the Kurds faced. This shows the unsteady phase of the poet who throws the whole responsibility upon Divine power, and indirectly declares his spiritual alienation. He states:

Have you brought the medicine for Aunt Agee
So, what have you fetched for this journey!
Only human skin, hair, and old garments
You shouldn't attend doomsday with empty
hands!
You ought to take crowns of roses to God !
And a rainy cloud to the prophet of deserts !
(P.186, lines 2-8)

At the end of Poe's poem, the narrator's soul gets cast upon the floor and the shadow of the raven covers his vulnerable soul, which represents Poe's own frustration. The poet's soul "will never be free of the shadowy grip that depression has on his soul" (Fling 3). The last scene is that of a triumphant demon, the raven, horrifying the narrator more and more, paralyzing him, keeping him in an oblivion state and what he gets from it, is only 'nevermore':

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still
is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my
chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's
that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his
shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out shadow that lies floating
on the floor
Shall be lifted__nevermore!
(Lines 104-110)

The question of the narrator expresses the poet's chaotic mind due to his spiritual alienation. The poet has lost his identity as a mindful and conscious man, as Davison states:

Between the jocular first question; "Tell me what
they lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian
shore,"
and the last question, the poetic imagination had
caught fire and expressed the terror of loss of self
and even of non-being. But the factual world
remain-
ed fact and chaos; and the shaping spirit had
nothing
more to do. (91-92)

Poe's writings are not merely stories that bring horror of fantasy, his literature is a serious method to show the underlying messages that he wants to deliver through writing. William Carlos William writes about Poe saying that his

importance lies in the fact that he gives “the sense for the first time in America, that literature is serious, not a matter of courtesy but of truth” (qtd.in Jeffares 109). Hence when he cares about his poetic images in “The Raven”, he deliberately wants to deliver through symbols and his poetic devices, the trouble of his narrator's soul.

Bekas feels extreme disappointment at the end of his poem, he asks God to inform him concerning the destiny of the victims. So, he starts making extra hallucinations including disbelieving in the existence of God when he deeply refutes His power; this is due to the poet's realization that no hope for his nation or their return from death, can be gained. He ends his poem calling the unhearing sounds to reply, and he even demands death and personifies it to rescue them from that torture. He draws metaphorical scenes to depict the state of his mind that he does not know whom he begs for the salvation of his people, he asks stones, desert, plants, anything to create a slight hope. He elucidates their condition through making ironical pictures showing the loneliness of his people and his both personal yielding and soul restlessness by saying:

They were not ice, but melting
Not fire but burning, not autumn but falling
Not glasses but breaking,
Oh, they were strangers in the desert
In which moon dies at night and the snow
In mountains is not aware!
(P. 192, lines 3-9)

So, a kind of oddness and soul disorder happens to the poet as he yields wholly to the fatal power and finds no clues to rescue them (his nation). He wonders why God remains silent till the end, why no one knows about them, and he ends up his poem with calling them out to reply but he gets no response; it is the same ‘nevermore’.

Conclusion

- 1- Soul's alienation, that causes the disintegration of personality, is not limited by time, age, place, etc. It is the plight of the inner world of the individuals which is mainly resulted from losing faith in God and the negligence of the religious side of one's life for different reasons like the two cases of Poe and Bekas.
- 2- Soul's alienation creates futility of efforts to improve the human condition, paralyzes the energy to escape out of the grave of loneliness. Both poets reflect hopelessness alike in spite of their different cultures, religion, and tradition.
- 3- Both of them create pure female symbols (Leonor, Aunt Agee) for showing the innocence and purity which have gone without return so that they might show their despair.
- 4- Soul's alienation leads to atheism as a result of a specific state of mind in a certain moment that occurs during a disastrous event, social isolation, and human being's behavior within his surroundings.
- 5- Poetry, for both poets, is the way to express their anger toward the Divine Power and their refusal to believe in His will that causes their soul or inner alienation.

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