



Research Paper

A Study of Metaphor: Upanishadic ‘Ratha Kalpana’ and Emily Dickinson’s “The Chariot”

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, Emily Dickinson’s poem “Because I could not stop for Death” is analysed in the light of Ratha Kalpana, an Upanishadic concept. ‘Ratha Kalpana’ is a metaphor which describes the association between the senses, mind, intellect and the self. First used in the Katha Upanishad, similar descriptions of the metaphor can also be seen in the Bhagawad Gita and the Buddhist Dhammapada. It can be considered to be one of the earliest references to Samkhya philosophy. The poem “Because I could not stop for death” is one of the best instances of her poetry in which death is celebrated as a theme. It was first published posthumously in Poems: Series 1 in 1890 under the title “The Chariot”. Death is portrayed as a gentleman caller who graciously rides with her to the grave.

KEYWORDS: Emily Dickinson, Chariot, Ratha Kalpana

I. INTRODUCTION

The poetry of Emily Dickinson, the 19th century American lyric poet known for her reclusive life and affinity to death, won much posthumous acclaim and she was generally considered to be ‘the poet of dread’ for the morbidity of her themes. Her intense passions were released through writing, almost in a cathartic way, and some critics consider her to be a Transcendentalist. She looked inwards to herself and wrote about individual consciousness. She worshipped immortality through death and personified the latter in ambivalent guises ranging from a suitor to an oppressor. Dying, for her, was the journey of the soul towards eternity.

The poem “Because I could not stop for death” is one of the best instances of her poetry in which death is celebrated as a theme. It was first published posthumously in Poems: Series 1 in 1890 under the title “The Chariot”. Death is portrayed as a gentleman caller who graciously rides with her to the grave. Composed in six quatrains with the meter alternating between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, the poet describes the carriage ride she has with death. This essay analyses the metaphor of the carriage in which the speaker rides with death. It is portrayed as a chariot drawn by horses. The imagery of the chariot has parallels in Ancient Indian as well as Greek Literature. The ‘ratha kalpana’ metaphor found in Upanishads and Bhagawad Gita and the chariot allegory in Plato’s Phaedrus will be dealt in the following paragraphs.

‘Ratha Kalpana’ is a metaphor which describes the association between the senses, mind, intellect and the self. First used in the Katha Upanishad, similar descriptions of the metaphor can also be seen in the Bhagawad Gita and the Buddhist Dhammapada. It can be considered to be one of the earliest references to Samkhya philosophy. Associated with the Cārika-Kaṭha school of the Black Yajurveda, the Katha Upanishad (Kathopaniṣad) is one of the primary Upanishads commented upon by Shankara and Madhva. The central theme of the text is the story of Nachiketa, son of sage Vajasravasa, and his encounter with Yama, Hindu God of death. Yama teaches Nachiketa self-knowledge and the separation of the human soul from the body. He explains the mystery of what comes after death, which is a brief revelation of Hindu metaphysics, and frees Nachiketa from the cycle of births. Yama’s teaching includes the Ratha Kalpana which equates the self (atman) to the chariot’s passenger, the body to the chariot itself, consciousness (buddhi) to the chariot driver, the mind (manas) to the reins, the five senses (indriya) to the chariot horses and the objects perceived by the senses to the chariot’s path.

The sum total of the combination of various experiences involving sound, touch, form, taste and smell constitute life in this world.

II. READING THE POEM ALONG WITH THE UPANISHAD

In Dickinson's poem, the speaker is a woman who was dead a long time ago, and her recollection of the journey which she realised to be towards eternity. She may be speaking about a previous life which happened centuries ago. She remembers about the journey in which Death, as a gentleman suitor, picked her up in his horse-drawn carriage. As they pass through the town, she saw vistas from everyday life, like children at play, fields of grain, and the setting sun till they reach her burial ground, marked with a small headstone. It is evident from the imagery of death that the passenger in the carriage is a soul. The chariot can be her body, as it is what that is affected by death. The sights she sees on the way form a part of the material life which she is leaving behind. Moreover, she has put away her 'labor' and leisure' to be with death. The senses or the horses are turned towards eternity, which means that the ultimate goal of the soul is to gain immortality or nirvana. The speaker could not stop for death suggests that she was busy with worldly pursuits. She suffers chill as she wears only a gossamer gown. As she has not let go of her material life fully, it can be surmised that she was reborn into another cycle of birth and death. Centuries seem shorter than that day in which she realised the philosophy of immortality.

"The Chariot" by Emily Dickinson written around 1863, tries to capture mortal experience from the standpoint of immortality. The idea of death is treated without any of the emotions of fear, anxiety or pain that usually accompany the idea. It is personified as a gentle friend who is taking the poet on a carriage ride to eternity. Another passenger in the carriage is immortality. Afterlife is therefore seen as an eternal journey. The image of the carriage and the driver is highly appropriate. The use of metaphor governs the structure of the poem. In this poem, the poetess describes her imaginative experience of death. She speculates about the meaning of death and probes the mystery of life after death. 'The Chariot' is the best and the most reflective poem of Emily Dickinson. At the apparent level, the poetess describes a funeral procession up to the grave. But at the deeper level, the poem describes a spiritual journey that takes one to eternity.

The poem is in the form of a narrative. The poetess personifies death as a courteous gentleman. Death meets her on the road of life. He takes her in his carriage for a ride. The poem describes this ride and the feelings of the poetess during this ride. The ride is a symbol of man's last journey on this earth. The carriage is a symbol of the hearse. In this poem, death is personified as a gentle friend who is taking the poetess on a carriage ride to eternity. Another passenger in the carriage is immortality. Thus life after death is seen as an eternal journey. The poetess had already guessed that the carriage was taking her to eternity.

A mention of Plato's Phaedrus is also necessary to conclude the analysis. Presumably composed around 370 BC, Phaedrus is a dialogue between Socrates, and Phaedrus in which the 'Chariot Allegory' is used to explain Plato's view of the human soul. The charioteer represents intellect; the white horse represents rational or moral impulse while the black one represents the soul's irrational passions. The charioteer directs the entire chariot/soul, trying to stop the horses from going different ways, and to proceed towards enlightenment. If overcome by the black horse, the soul loses its wings and is pulled down to earth and is incarnated. The speaker in Dickinson's poem may have been overcome by the irrational passions or fears which made her come again into the world as a new person. Like Nachiketa who got the mystery behind death, the speaker was also taught about immortality by death.

The poetess says that one day Death himself came to her. He took the poetess for a ride in his Chariot. He drove his chariot very slowly. He was in no haste. The poetess says that she put away all her worldly activities to accompany Death. She gave up all the labour and leisure of her life. She did so in order to reciprocate the courtesy of Death. All the activities of man come to end with his death. But she accepts the fact of death calmly. There is no pain in her thought of death. To conclude we can say that the poetess honoured Death. She gave up not only her work but also her leisure for the sake of Death. Now she is sitting in the carriage along with death. Thus we find that Death is presented as a gentle friend, not a horrible thing. The poetess says that the chariot passed by a school. The children were playing there. They had hardly finished their

lessons yet. Then the chariot passed by the fields. Crops were growing there. Grains were gazing at the riders. Lastly, the chariot passed by the setting sun.

In fact, the mind of the poetess goes back to the past. She thinks of the journey of life that leads ultimately to death. The school, the grain and the setting sun are respectively the symbols of childhood, youth and old age. Thus these lines describe the journey to immortality.

The chariot analogy first appears the third chapter of Katha Upanishad, as a device to explain the Atman (Self) as distinct from the mind, intelligence and sense organs. In this context, spiritual practice is seen as a return to consciousness through the levels of manifested existence. The metaphor forms a part of the teaching imparted to Nachiketa, a child seeking knowledge about life after death, by Yama, the Hindu god of death. Verses 1.3.3–11 of Katha Upanishad deal with the allegoric expression of human body as a chariot. The body is equated to a chariot where the horses are the senses, the mind is the reins, and the driver or charioteer is the intellect. The passenger of the chariot is the Self (Atman). Through this analogy, it is explained that the Atman is separate from the physical body, just as the passenger of a chariot is separate from the chariot. The verses conclude by describing control of the chariot and contemplation on the Self as ways by which the intellect acquires Self Knowledge

William K. Mahony, in *The Artful Universe: An Introduction to the Vedic Religious Imagination*, writes, "We have in this metaphor an image of a powerful process that can either lead to fulfillment or in which the seeker can become lost."

III. CONCLUSION

Emily Dickinson can be considered to be a true Transcendentalist and a mystic poet as well. As Allen Tate commented, Dickinson has presented the typical Christian theme of how the human will, detailed with all the intangible powers of the mind, is put to the concrete test of experience and the idea of immortality confronted with death. Her metaphor also transcends spatial and temporal margins and appeals to the human mind, which is universal. The metaphor of Ratha Kalpana, a concept from Indian Upanishad, is portrayed in the poem, keeping well in tune with Dickinson's Transcendentalist affiliation.

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