

THE ART OF THE SUBLIME: A LONGINIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE CITY OF BRASS BY S.A. CHAKRABORTY

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Abstract

The paper explores a comparative analysis of the book “The City of Brass” the first novel in the Daevabad Trilogy by S. A. Chakraborty and the classical work On The Sublime by Longinus. To explore a deeper understanding of the subject researcher has used the descriptive qualitative method, to compare both the texts along with their detailed analysis. The study examines how the classical concept of sublimity as articulated by Longinus is depicted in Chakraborty’s modern fantasy work. Through the findings one can investigate the key elements given by Longinus as grandeur, use of language, emotional intensity and many more being present in the work. The researcher also tries to explore how Eastern mythology has been successfully applied to the work. This paper is a comparative study highlighting the relevance and adaptability of classical theories in modern literature.

Keywords: Eastern Mythology, sublimity, classical theories.

Introduction

“It is by greatness, rather than beauty, that we measure the sublime,” said Longinus. It is sublime that requires to fill the literature in order for it to attain the greatest peak. It is the ultimate aim of literature which it should serve and transport its reader to something that transcends ordinariness. Rubbish cannot be literature and literature can never be rubbish. It aims to stir the deepest of thoughts, the overflowing emotions in readers which makes them experience something beyond imagination. Emotional impact, the crucial aspect of archiving sublimity, serves as a branch which is profound for human existence. Again literature is just not merely for aesthetic beauty but it is

the depth of ideas, vastness and miraculous language which fabricate an impactful literature. It is a flower flourishing our culture and soul with its fragrance. It's fragrance carries within an appeal to forge our mind, and experiences and modify our personalities.

It is the power of literature which Longinus wanted to investigate through his concept of the sublime. It would not be wrong to say that everyone cannot acquire the greatness of producing great works. As Wordsworth emphasized on this in his acclaimed work "Preface to Lyrics Ballads (1800)" he says, " He is a man speaking to men : a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a great knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind". So the fact raised by Longinus cannot be overlooked that true genius is a rarity.

In this research proposal, the chosen subject is taken to be "The City of Brass" a renowned novel of The Daevabad Trilogy by famed writer S. A. Chakraborty. She is an American writer, based in Queens, New York. She is a celebrated name in the field of Historical fantasy and speculative fiction. The Daevabad Trilogy, a series known for magically blending the Middle Eastern history, Islamic Mythology and fantasy. The City of Brass (2017), the first in this series is followed by Kingdom of Copper (2019) and then Empire of Gold (2020). 'Chakraborty's debut novel, "The City of Brass", was highly acclaimed when it debuted in 2017 and was a finalist for several science fiction and fantasy awards, including the Crawford Award, Compton Crook Award, Locus Award, British Fantasy Award, World Fantasy Award. It won the Booknest.eu award for best Debut Novel. The sequel, "The Kingdom of Copper", was published to critical acclaim in 2019, and later that year Chakraborty was named a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award' (2019 Hugo Awards). 'She originally intended to be a historian specializing in the Middle East; however, the financial crisis around 2008 derailed those plans, so while she worked to support herself and her husband, she also kept herself occupied by writing what she called "historical fan fiction" that later became her first novel, The City of Brass'.(Charaipotra)

Daevabad is mythical spellbinding city full of power, politics and enchantments. Nahri who possess mysterious healing abilities has now been dragged into this hidden world of ancient rivalries, djinn politics, it is from here the journey with richly textured setting begins. As the trilogy moves the backstories of characters, their actions revealing their hidden motives charges

the story forward. New settings, magical system, and historical contexts also enlarges along with the exploration of Persian and Arabic cultures. The final book is “The Empire of Gold” which is known for it’s climactic conclusion. In general the journey of this novel revolves around the key themes of Destiny, Identity, Power and Culture as well.

Nahri is on her quest to live, but her circumstances claim otherwise. She is an ingenious woman who is unaware of her ancient lineage. A miraculous turn has been taken by her life when she summons Dara an ancient warrior Djinn and finds herself in the magical realm of Daevabad, which she never knew existed. Dara suspicious of her heritage later finds her as the last surviving of long lost race of Nahids, the healers. On the other side, the novel encompasses the elements of brutality, discrimination, magical battles, court intrigues, and political alliances. Prince Alizayd Al Qahtani, is caught between his loyalty towards his father's oppressive rule and his heartfelt desire for justice for shafit, who are inhumanely treated by purebloods and the political regime. Prince Ali is a devout and principled man who begins his journey for justice in a world rife with corruption and prejudices. In this fast-paced political drama, readers are caught up in the cobweb of ancient tapestry of mythology, Middle Eastern history and Islamic folklore.

On the Sublime: A Treatise by Longinus

Critics are the judges who have to collect the pearls in the overflowing valley of literature. Cassius Longinus is one of them, he is a rhetorician, a great philosophical critic and the presumed writer of “On the Sublime”, a noted work in the domain of literary criticism and aesthetics. ‘Born in either Emesa or Athens, he studied at Alexandria under Ammonius Saccas and Origen the Pagan, and taught for thirty years in Athens, one of his pupils being Porphyry. Longinus did not embrace the Neoplatonism then being developed by Plotinus, but continued as a Platonist of the old type and his reputation as a literary critic was immense. During a visit to the east, he became a teacher, and subsequently chief counsellor to Zenobia, queen of Palmyra. It was by his advice that she endeavoured to regain her independence from Rome. Emperor Aurelian, however, crushed the revolt, and Longinus was executed’ . (Chisholm, 981)

Through his work, one can get the echo of his knowledge and proficiency. So one can understand why Eunapius called him a living library and a walking museum. His work is abundant in reference to other literary works that give the idea of how Longinus himself would have been well-versed

and learned. He is credited for being the author of “On The Sublime” but till date, scholars are still uncertain of his exact identity. The debates and theories are still alive for the work which dates from 1st or 3rd century CE , as it was Longinus’s insights which made a drastic influence on later thinkers from both ancient and modern literary criticism. It has been said that Longinus was a disciple of Plotinus, and considered “the most distinguished scholar of his times”.

Sublimity is the echo of a noble mind, said Longinus. (Longinus) In his celebrated work, he throws light on the concept of sublime of which general audience lacks in understanding. In his work Longinus praises and despises certain literary works and examined them under the category of good or bad styles of writing. In the very beginning we see this work being addressed to Terentian he might also be a scholar, well acquainted with current artistic and literally scenarios, otherwise he would not make out extravagant examples presented by Longinus. His work depicts that criticism requires something more than just readership. Greatest writers and poets have already got their ever lasting place in the Temple of Fame. And Sublimity according to him is all about appalling to senses, to both readers and spectators. This process doesn’t mean to convince its reader to believe something but to transport them, once in a state of sublime they will loose their powers and the sublime will take over their senses and soul. Earlier critics gave rules and regulations like Aristotle, but Longinus departs from this approach and solely focused upon aesthetics and emotions. But he believes that poets need to be trained to reach the stage that they will uphold the power of creating sublimity in their work. And Genius is inborn, but someone has to control it, it cannot be left like an abandoned ship, as when in ocean it requires someone to hold it’s direction.

He gives some extravagant examples for how to make language rich in sublimity. Sometimes ridiculous work or meaningless phrases might make it a laughing stock. He gives description about how certain qualities should be included as he doesn’t want to compromise on quality. Also directly pointing towards the things should be avoided, as some technicality is to be maintained.

Sublimity is not merely a play of superficial language as ornamented and decorative language is not enough to produce sublime. He pointed out what kind of man is capable of stirring sublime in any work, only lofty minds can create lofty work. He tells to avoid puerility, false sentiments, and overelaboration might end in frigidity, he wants to draw a state of equilibrium between following technicalities and having a pedantic mind. But a pedantic mind sometimes overflow in

the details which will not be able to serve the purpose either. Also over display of anything again leads to suppress the deepest and honest emotion. If the writer is not capable of portraying his faithful display of personal feelings then it won't bring sublime. If there is sublime then it is false sublime, he warns us against it. He is not judging but wants his readers to be a careful judge when it comes to find false sublime, he guides us with a roadmap of technicalities to be aware about. As false sublime is a play of exterior or superficiality, which is nothing but emptiness. A language full of ornaments and use of metaphors is used to hide the trivialities of thought and the cheap display of passion. While true sublime carries within a passion, it is clothed with new ideas and lavish thoughts.

Later on he goes on to portray the aspects which elevated or lofty mind share. The concept of sublimity is tied with the loftiness, the writer's mind possess. As they don't rely on artificial flourishes instead elevated mind naturally produce sublime thoughts. They are capable of igniting a flare of intense emotions in the ordinary readers, their writing manifest sublime as their profound thoughts and emotions are dealt with the intellectual or moral stature.

Research Methodology

In this research, the researcher has tried to explore the facts by using a descriptive qualitative research method. Description are very crucial in any literary analysis which allows the researcher to see through the bottomless facts and views. And Qualitative research doesn't just look forward towards quantity but rather excellence. They encourage factual, subjective views for the formation of any high-quality analysis. By using the above method the researcher tried to explore the elements of a well-known ancient work by one of the writers known for his treatise *On the Sublime*. *On the Sublime* is considered as a foundational work in literature and aesthetics. By focusing on the proposed facts by Longinus researcher tries to draw a fascinating intersection between ancient and contemporary work.

Review of Literature

A review of literature for theory by Longinus and for the Novel by S. A Chakraborty "The City of Brass" will explore the various comparative studies, interpretations, critical perspectives by critics, and debates regarding the concept of the subline as presented in Longinus' treatise "On

the Sublime”. How the ideas and concepts by Longinus impact on literary criticism and later works.

Primary Source

The original text of the book “The City of Brass” was written by S. A. Chakraborty. And the writings of Longinus entitled as “On the Sublime”.

Secondary sources

An article by Patrick Glauthier titled “The Classical Sublime”. In this article, the writer focuses on exploring the concept of the sublime given by Longinus. By adopting an expansive understanding of it from the beginning one can get clear understanding of the classical sublime.

“The Sublime without Longinus” by James I. Porter again delves into the explanation of sublimity. ‘The contemporary understanding of Longinus and the sublime, which has been dominant for centuries (since Boileau), is crucially flawed. It is Longino-centric, it is riddled with assumptions about rhetoric, philosophy, and nature, and it forcibly enrols the sublime in a well-worn tale about the aesthetic origins of modernity, which must itself transcend antiquity in order to be fully modern. On a fresh look at the problem, Longinus can be shown to be an incidental moment in the history and reception of the sublime.’ (Porter, 73-124)

Another chapter by James I. Porter delves into the understanding of the value of studying aesthetic values in antiquity. ‘In other words, aesthetic values are intimately bound up with the deepest values of ancient subjects whose experiences of life in its variety of manifestations exhibit a wide range of meaningful aesthetic encounters.’ (Porter, 47-70)

Research study on “Arabian Mythology in The City of Brass by S. A. Chakraborty” by Djihane Fatima Zohra Chabane, and Lila Messaoudi. This paper explores the use of Arabian Mythology, folklore and myths through the work by S. Chakraborty. ‘Presently, Western writers have renewed their awe with Arabian Mythology and a shift has been observed during the past decades. Nevertheless, many of those titles are written with an Orientalist lens and do not show accurate representations of the cultures and myths they seek to represent. Opposite to this, are works that do utilize Arabian mythology in the way it is supposed to, Without stereotyping and alienating the Other, with respect for the sources, and backed by accurate information. Among the titles that

show Arabian myths in a positive light is “The City of Brass” by S. A. Chakraborty, a highly acclaimed work centered around a universe weaved with Arabian mythical elements intertwined with the author’s imaginative abilities’. (Chaband and Djihane, 418)

Another research titled as “Signs of Scripture in The City of Brass” by Bruce Fudge. The researcher mentions this work to be similar to the tales of Thousands and One Nights. Moreover, this article explores that the story contains many references to the Islamic story of Solomon.

A research article by Michelle M. Hamilton entitled as “Solomon, His Jinn, and Molten Copper: The City of Brass in Medieval Spanish Fiction”. It explores how the knowledge of precious stones and metals is being depicted in this work “The City of Brass”, particularly the use of copper, statues, walls and the secrets of the pre – pre-Islamic past.

Analysis

Grandeur of thoughts

Every expression carries a mark of greatness within itself depicting the richness of it’s craftsmen. Longinus throughout his work believed in the power to elevate the reader from himself and can witness the intellectual wisdom and insight. Transcending the mundane from their mundane world to the world of the writer portrays the high-mindedness and the capacity to produce a sense of awe or grandeur by the writer. We witness this capacity in City of Brass where the readers are transported to the world of myths and histories. Through the examples used by Longinus one can definitely consider him a master, and we encounter the same grandeur when Chakraborty describes any architecture. She describes ancient buildings with reference to Nabatean graffiti, friezes of Etruscan satyrs, and Mauryan stupas, these examples can be understood only by studious minds. She carefully blends cultures and history through her intricate descriptions of architecture, which also pays tribute to their original heritage. Like she lists the majestic gates and their names suggest another deeper symbols relating them with their originality, Sahrayn Gate which was laden with purple fruit. Ayaanle, then The Geziri Gate which can be related to the Gezira dynasty, then Agnivanshi Gate which have dancing figures along with oil lamps again a symbol of world’s one the oldest civilization. Then Tukharistani Gate and then the last one which leads the readers to world of city of brass: The Daeva Gate. Her elevated wandering mind leaves it glimpse through

her structured magic system of Daevabad, which is deeply rooted in Islamic mythology, like the Nahid tribe specialist of healing powers, geziri in combat with fire magic, others like Ayaanle, Agnivanshi, Tukharistani, Shafit the mixed blooded with their distinct abilities, Marids the powerful water Djinn, Ifrit the rebellious and cunning ones, Peris and Rukh who are the creatures from Persian mythology, even she has specified relics and enchanted weapons along with the descriptions of their origin which indicates her knowledge. And even though it is a work of fantasy, writer established a realistic attitude of real world by introducing the aspects of racial and cultural discrimination among the Djinn tribes, the portrait of society highly aligns with the contemporary society as well, hence it would not be wrong to say she has given the real world attitude through her fantasy work which symbolizes the cultural significance of this work. These factors indicate the elevated capacity of writer who produced a work consisting of fiction but it is not merely a fiction.

This entire work echoes mythologies around the world. The way she has arranged the magical system and myths and legends is highly descriptive and can be understood by anyone. She did justice with folklores, she uses the technique of flashbacks as well to give the entire backstory of them or she conveys it through dialogue making it easier to understand. Sublime is produced through the comfort which reader gets in any writing. Like Madrid, they are the water elementary, Daevas were the land holders while Marids and Peri kept to their realms in air and water. Author describes how Ifrit who was annoyed with Prophet Sulaiman's reign kept on killing the Nahids whose blood was fatal. She also presents other creatures like ghouls, Rukh birds, Karkadann, Sheddu, Zahhak and many others. Her writing style and ideas show the depth of knowledge she owns on the subjects of history and mythologies. Her ideas can be said to achieve grandeur as they successfully produce intellectual stimulation and deep feelings.

Intense Emotions

An artist's impression lies in his expression of emotions. They evoke a sense of connection between the reader and the characters. We witness thousands of emotions on the roller coaster journey that Chakraborty has written, from the mothers wailing to when Anas died because of being a shafit a marginalized group, women trading their bodies to survive, Hanno with sword to protect their shafit babies. These events triggered feeling of pity not only in readers but the

protagonist, prince Ali. She presented the brutality of pureblooded against Shafit with vivid descriptions, how Anas was burned, whipped, starved, his face and eyes swollen, nose broken, a man devoid of magical capabilities was surrounded by hundreds of vengeful men. Then he was tortured till he died but he never uttered Ali from his mouth which was enough to show his loyalty and love for his people. Ali on the other hand was numb, till now he was living in a peaceful world but then came the reality of his people, the ones who kill and the ones who die, both were his own. Another social compass the writer gives is when Ali's father orders that he would sell the children of Shafit and hand over their women to his soldiers, everyone knew what this reveals.

Another scene is when Nahri tries to steal the Emerald ring from Dara, she was transported to his hidden memories. Earlier when he killed people, on the order of human master whom he was bounded to follow. Dara hated humans but still he never wanted to do what he did and till then he was hunted with horrors of guilt. He wanted his beautiful city filled with people but he was forced to follow the master against his internal will, Chakraborty again did justice with the narrative style when she showed how the city was filled with dead bodies, the smell of blood was everywhere.

We also seem to develop a connection with Nahri who works on the power of Eros, at odd with life she just wants to survive. Dara describes her human life as pathetic which she never felt, as in order to survive she had to lie and steal and lived in fear of being arrested for sorcery which was forbidden in Cairo. She doesn't had any family or any friend but a will to survive. Later she got a chance of wealthy and respectable life if she agrees to go with Dara to Daevabad.

Use of Figures of Speech

Foreshadowing: in the beginning, we witness how skillfully the writer leaves the clues for its readers to join. She showed how Nahri was human but she has powers beyond human control. Her eyes were different than the rest, she carried within her healing capacity which she herself was not very aware how can she do that. Then we see that she can understand and speak any language. And she has a different language of her own which she thinks she might have learnt from her parents when she was a child and considers it as her native language which later turned out to be Divasti the language from Daevabad.

Imagery: this is what makes the work stand out of other works. The descriptions of Euraphates river, the isolated Island, the city of Daevabad and even Cairo makes imagination run wild. The presentation is rich which can make the reader picturize her words. Her prose is laden with evocative language.

Allusions: she masterfully blends history and myths. Her usage of allusions are on ordinary ones but they originates from ancient Arabian, Persian and Islamic mythologies and histories as well. Like how Prophet Sulaiman's name and ring are repeatedly used, he holds distinct power that he being a human can control Djinn and can take their powers as well. He has given the credit of forming a bridge of peace between Djinn and Humans. Also Solomon's seal alludes to King Solomon known for wisdom in Christian, Islamic and Jewish traditions. Then Zulfikar which alludes to Islamic history, it's the mightiest sword.

Irony: There are various instances in which we find the use of Irony by the writer. Like in the beginning, the description of Daevabad makes one believe that it might be the city of magic and peace but it turns out it's politically corrupt and societal injustices are at peak. We also see Ali who works on the principle of the superego and is deeply connected to his religious beliefs who put efforts to bring justice to Shafit but end up entangling Anas, a Shafit into political turmoil which lead him to his death. Also, the identity of Nahri is ironic, like she lived like a thief and ends up being the descendant of one the strongest bloodlines of Nahids.

Noble Diction

For Longinus, Noble diction is an important ingredient for producing the sublime. And it's a complex term which vary for some in its definition. It can consist of many elements like an elevated vocabulary, tone, sentence structure and many others things. We can claim City of Brass having an elevated diction in terms of its use of high-register words instead of using casual language. In many places the author has borrowed words from other languages as well like "maidan" this word has roots in Persian and Urdu language, and "Agnivanshi" this word is originated from Sanskrit and refers to people who are descendants of fire God Agni. Also, the word "Adhan" which is an Arabic word and it for the call to prayer in Muslims. The word "Minaret" has roots in Arabic and Turkish language. The use of this technique makes the work significant in depicting ancient histories. Noble Diction also carries grand themes like morality or nobility in thoughts and the

subject matter should not be trivial. And here we witness the Daevabad and its creatures having well-addressed roots in their mythological backgrounds.

We also witness a lot of historical places with their long lost civilization which can help in the intellectual and cultural development of the readers. Like “Ufratu-el- Furat” the Euraphates river which holds symbolic meaning in many civilizations. Another one is Hierapolis which is an ancient Greek city, the river Gozan which is in Mesopotamia area and it also alludes to biblical reference, El Arafa: the city of Dead, present day Cairo, Fustat Or Fostat which was the first capital of Egypt and many others.

Also the absence of colloquial language in City of Brass also helps in generating sublime because using the casual or slangs of day to day life might lead to degrade the work and suppress the lofty ideas of author.

Dignified Composition

How the sentences are arranged leave a major impact on readers. The work arrangements decide whether the reader will continue or not. Sublimity cannot be achieved using unpolished or trivial sentence style. The arranged sentences should be able to depict the grave subject which the author tries to convey. In City of Brass we see a dignified composition of word order and tone. Tone is rather serious and properly aligned with the characters as well. The construction of society of Daevabad builds the tension and helps to guide its multi layered plot. The author had done justice with portraying the perspectives of characters meanwhile presenting mirrors to their past as well. When Dara was introduced, through the eyes of Nahri he was rather a kidnapper but later on one can see him a savior. His past reflects the brutality of world. Also in the beginning one can see Anas as a person taking advantage of Ali's position but the writer has woven all the incidents so orderly that it doesn't take much to change one's perspective. Reader will see the harshness Shafit people go through daily, also this helps to morally transform Ali. All those incidents help in generating Ali's character as a morally upright leader.

Moreover Nahri the protagonist of the work was not aware of her lineage but incidents one by one reveal something new to her everytime something happen, readers like Nahri were unaware of

Daevabad but through her eyes they grasp the magical city. Hence we can say the incidents as well as sentence composition and arrangements are perfectly woven by the writer.

Conclusion

The city which reader thought as a sanctuary turned out to be prison. But the entire journey, woven so masterfully by the writer, was able to achieve grandeur and evoke awe along with the profound emotional experience. The theme was itself grand and epic in terms of its exploration of folklore, histories and mythologies. The narrative style of the writer is worth the praise as it transcends the soul of the reader. The moment of turmoil, tragic stories, flashbacks, intense personal conflicts and moral dilemma adds to elevate one's emotions. One could easily judge how to witness the true sublime through this work which leaves the reader with a sense of wonder and human frailty.

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