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Interplay of Mythopoetics and Proletariat Struggle in Rudolf Anaya's *Heart of Aztlan*: A Critical Reading of Chicano Theory and Perspective in the Novel

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Abstract:

The aim of this research paper is to go through a Marxist interpretation of Chicano Literature and closely read the Mythopoetics of Chicano texts. Anaya's novels can be called as one of the foundational texts; that trace the history of Chicano struggle and protests against oppression and assertion of their identity and the various cultural dilemmas the community has confronted in their past and present. His famous novel: *Heart of Aztlan*, explicitly suggests how the Chicano struggle issues forth from their collective past and their attitude towards migration and oppression is both mythic and economic in nature. It examines how Chicano literary texts negotiate country legends, myths and folklore with the socio-political struggles of contemporary times; a consequence of not only the economic crisis and labour struggle but Anaya gives the burgeoning theme a mytho-historical mileage shifting spaces between past and present and thus his famous novel becomes a distinguished Socialist text representative of Chicano experience enshrouded in the Cultural memory of the community from its very beginning and origin.

Keywords: Chicano, Myth, Cultural Memory, Marxism, Migration, Oppression, Revolution.

An Introduction to Chicano studies:

Chicano literature has raised to a position of prominence over recent times as the continuing issue of mass migration by the Mexican community and the never-ending oppression by the capitalist regimes across both sides of the border, their loss of identity and recognition as an integral part of American society, their continuous deportations unto those stringent border patrolling policies; risking their livelihood, peace and security has intensified and created a huge conflict and disturbance within and around the Mexican-American community. All of this finds a creative outlet in the shape of the vividly drawn socio-political and emotionally charged Chicano literary texts and various counter-culture movements. Chicano texts candidly speak against the discrimination and violence committed

against their community .The issue of migration has now emerged as a primary bone of contention in the contemporary American politics and the communities literature resonates with a high note of grief that has gripped them over so many years now— an understated , marginalized and discriminated position of the community within the American society. Neo liberalism, globalization and new technology have tried to construct an image in the collective culture of America; a “Common Sense” that all the battles against oppression, inequality or any exploitation have been more or less won. But how did Chicano movement gain a huge momentum in American Politics? . At the same time we should also be aware of poverty and marginalization in the movement's very inception. The Chicano movement that took shape in the late 1960s transformed the identity, politics, and the social dynamics of Mexican Americans and the movement was very malleable; that it could not be figured in terms of any singular organization but whatsoever ,the movement stood for basic civil rights which Chicanos were openly denied of . (Estrada)

It is also important to note how Mexicans view crossing the border as an opportunity to improve their living conditions for themselves and their families though they have had a strong bonding to their Mexican nationality and their people would look at those that became U.S. citizens as traitors. (Mario T pp.6)

The concept of liberalism and modernization that changed the whole edifice of America as a progressive ,advanced and just nation was already there .It was actually inspired from the “Enlightenment” movement that vouched for the belief of human emancipation. Similarly the Chicano movement was built upon the principles of “emancipatory politics” as the major thrust apart from some radical agendas, the movement stands for . (Pina 45-75)

Chicano literature which is an offshoot of Chicano movement tends to focus on themes of identity, discrimination, culture, and history, with an emphasis on validating the Mexican-American experience or Chicano culture in the United States.

During the last decades many scholars and academicians have tried to write about Chicano experience but they have also underestimated the role played by the Mexican-American border in the evolution of Chicano people and also the resultant labour struggle closely associated with it. (Martínez 85-106)

Heart of Aztlan as a representative Chicano Text:

Rudolf Anaya in his classic Chicano novels is actually engaging with the earlier events in the Mexican –American History and is trying to frame or construct the history of Chicano migration and struggle. His second novel “Heart of Aztlan” from the trilogy tries to document a narrative of socio-economic significance that goes deep down to the impulses and desires of the Mexican community that stand for growth , progress and assertion .The Mexican endeavors for voluntary migration is given a mythic significance , although their struggle is proletariat in nature . These two factors simultaneously seem to affect migration among the Chicanos and create internal tension within the community. First there is oppression ,bias and draining of wealth that Mexicans suffer from, both during the pre-war and post-war New Mexico at the hands of authorities and capitalist designs across both sides , that bring them down to a situation of taking up migration just like in Heart of Aztlan when Clementes and his family decides to sell their land in the agrarian area of New Mexico and are indirectly forced to a move to an urbanized area where the prospects for them initially appear to be high. But we can see a generation gap within the Clementes family symbolic of the multiple perspectives and voices that emerge about the prospect of voluntary migration. Whereas on one hand, father takes the action of migration with a heavy heart and at the time the wife and sons seem to welcome migration as a way for upward social mobility and a means to avail unlimited opportunities but slowly as they go along with the wave , they ultimately realize that how the Mexican barrio has to see a life of torture and humiliation in the urbanized area they have made their home and earn their living as factory workers getting poor wages and their lives drastically change and shape into becoming struggling labourer class that collectively suffer from the excruciating capitalists from the other side as well, the situation they have brought upon themselves, now they themselves start cursing . The Mexican community begins to lose their identity as they face a cultural invasion that badly affects the community from inside, there is a loss of values and an issue of Narco-violence also arises against the community that tends to destroy the Chicano society from within.(Heart of Aztlan)

Myth of Chicano migration and resistance movement in Heart of Aztlan:

So where is Aztlan and what is the significance of Aztlan as far as Chicano community is concerned? During the 1960s and 70s of Chicano movement the idea of historical-

geographic Aztlan became a unifying factor in cultural renaissance as the movement aspired upon to reconstruct the history and space for the Chicanos, which was neglected by academicians and American socio-political forces and they were left unrecognised of having any rich historical heritage and their position became obscure and insignificant within the American framework of cultural and social representation and perspective. Aztlan was both the physical and mythic homeland of the Aztecs and informed the myth poetics of Mesoamerica.(Pina pp.45-75)

Thus Aztlan became a mighty subject for Anaya in his novel that laid the foundation for the community's origin, struggle and displacement.

Crispin said,

We are the fruit of the people who wandered from the mythical land of Aztlan, the first people of this land who wandered south in search of a sign, the first people of the land who wandered south for sign (Anaya 83).

Crispin continued:

a burning god fell from the sky and told the people to travel southward. The sign was a giant bird in whose claws would be ensnared the poisonous snakes which threatened the people in that place...the wanderers from Aztlan were to build their new civilization (83).

Myth gives us a revelation of a collective past of a community and gives a good explanation about a multitude of shared aspects and attitudes of a community. Myth is known for its longevity as it stays with the community for a considerable period of time unlike other narratives that have no fixed existence and is generally accepted by the community. It may be suppressed, interrupted or forgotten but it can never be erased from the community's collective memory. Myths keep on resuscitating across the collective history of the people as they have a recurring nature. Aztlan as a myth was forgotten but since the Chicano Literature emerged, the myth re-emerged too. Aztlan was a place the Chicanos could claim as their own. (Lomeli 3-4)

They wanted a physical space or reality that could give their origins a strength and significance as this is the most essential right that has a material and metaphorical absence in USA and the Chicano's are facing a continuous denial and suppression as a part of American society; as a hybrid and inferior culture in the contemporary American society although their community was quite native to the soil of America. The Chicanos have suffered from a loss; loss of land, loss of culture, loss of history. So the whole Chicano narrative is centred around the sentiment of loss and the land of Aztlan becomes a great recovery of that past, a great cure for their insecurity to lose their identity amid the politically complex and heterogeneous

American environment . The myth is a rescue for them against cultural invasion or erosion as a means of resisting assimilation and extinction of their past as the myth of a community stays authentic and has an enduring quality against the test of time and becomes a tool to recapture their great and idyllic cultural history and therefore map their space in the American society.

According to Anaya myth is the essence of the souls of the community and myth has great potential for Truth and myth also serves as the mirror for a cultures belief system that has a sacred significance for the community or the revelation of the basic and primordial forces working within the structure of a society.

In response to the violent and revolutionary approach of Lalo Cleamentes has a very sacred stance towards the flame of Revolution that has been struck in every oppressed worker:

‘Burn everything! Destroy Everything!’ Lalo Shouted. But Clementes says:

What that god should have stolen for us mortal men is the pure fire that gushes from the soul of our people, from the foundation of our history — only that fire can burn the temple of false god (207)!

The myth of Aztlan is widely used in Chicano texts and discourse; it explains and reflects the community’s collective stance of undertaking a difficult sojourn by narrating the events of their ancestors, the Aztec people who started from the Northern part of Aztlan to the southward direction and eventually their founding of a great empire of Tenochtitlan. Aztlan is a place of “seven caves” as the name itself suggests the meaning: ‘chicomoztoc’ a toponym for, “caves surrounded by water on all sides and from these seven caves, the seven clans of people set out for south to find their destiny”. While undergoing this journey the Aztec people also encountered immense knowledge and technology, which the stable land of Aztlan, their actual place of origin was completely oblivious and thus they were lagging behind in terms of progress, even though the place was a harmonious abode and a repository of ethics, values and glorious civilization. For their ancestors the journey proved to be a successful endeavour and also lead to their urbanization as they came across knowledge and technology. Remaining stationary in there peaceful land of Aztlan, would not have ensured any progress as the culture collectively had a desire for discovery, learning, growth and expansion which any big culture would aspire for .(qtd. In Pina 45-75)

This mythic narrative is in full bloom in Anaya's novel, when Clementes in his visionary past journey comes across a realization about the true nature and spirit of his community:

...that infusion of spirit into flesh which generations of wise men had described throughout the ages was the simple bond of loves that gave the river its strength to surge and roar and cut its new channel (Anaya 208)...

Marxist approach towards Chicano struggle:

Similarly in Anaya's novel set in the year 1940s, the Chicano family leaves their rural home in Guadalupe, New Mexico for a more urban and developed town, Albuquerque, for search of work and for changing their destiny as the myth also suggest the reasons behind the communities peregrination, but we also have to admit the truth about the families decision for migration which is initiated by the huge financial losses their original hometown had wreaked upon them; an overpowering economic crisis inflicted upon the family in their agrarian homeland known to be politically very unstable. Besides we cannot deny the primary place of materialism and various productive forces that are embedded within the community's constant struggle, crisis and creation of a situation that lead to mass migration. The mentality of the bourgeois class for upward social mobility and an overbearing attraction for America as a booming capitalist economy with tremendous opportunities that would fulfil their false ideals of "humanism" for discovery, exploration and success often dismissed by the Marxists as an instrument of "false conscience" or "ideological state apparatus" of the economically dominating class.

The myth may also be condemned by the Marxists as an ideological instrument and a design for carrying internalised economic oppression at the hands of Capitalists but in Anaya's novel it channelizes Chicanos for reclaiming their previously obscured and lost identity. Without a land which he could now call his own, Clemente begins to feel rootless, aloof and insecure with an ethereal and dispersed identity. Clemente feels quite dislocated and the strong values of his family have already shown signs of disintegration and fragmentation. Myth critiques often deny any reductionist view towards myth that demands for a realistic origin of myth and thus shifting the view of myth as a creation or construct of history. Ernst Cassirer in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* gave a clear proposition about myth as a pure thought, unmediated, imagistic and symbolic form of communication and fundamentally non discursive and heavily emotion-laden. (Reeve)

Jung's most influential idea of a "collective unconscious," a racial memory, consisting of "primordial images" or archetypes repeatedly finds an artistic expression in Anaya's *Heart of Aztlan*.

Northrop Frye's efforts nonetheless suggest how powerfully myth can organize our thinking about literature and about culture. Frye suggests a conceptual means of drawing individual and apparently unrelated archetypal images--the fundamentals of psyche and culture--into a coherent and ultimately hierarchical framework of "mythos" one organizing not only individual literary works but the entire system of literary works, that is, literature. Anaya's novel has built upon this theory and tried to dig out the real identity of Chicanos from their past experiences shrouded in history and legends of their original homeland:

Everywhere the wind moaned with the name of their homelandin the stories of the past always the four directions were pointed out and in the centre stood Aztlan They walked to the land where the sun risesthey found new signs and the signs; pointed them back to the centre, back to Aztlan

Where? Clemente cried in pain, Oh where the source of my river is!

There, the wind answered, there where the seven springs from the sacred lake! There by the desert of the white herons!

Time stood still, and in that enduring moment he felt the rhythm of the heart of aztlan beat to the measure of his own heart. Dreams and vision became reality, and reality was but the thin substance of myths and legends. A joyful power coursed from the dark womb-heart of the earth into his soul and he cried out I AM AZTLAN (Anaya 131).

Amid all this chaos when Clementes is at the end of his wits, Crispin and the witch come to his rescue and offer him hope. In Anaya's novels supernatural elements play a key role for joining the events of past with the contemporary or explaining the events of present and future in terms of the past events. The witch helps Clementes to have a vision about Chicanos glorious legend of Aztlan. The myth gets revealed to him and Crispin feels Clemente has a potential for changing the course of history as he is the one who has the capacity to be gifted the power of myth, to identify its true potential and then transfer it and convert or mobilize it as strength for his people. It is from the revelation of myth only Clemente gets an explanation about the misfortunes of his people. He comes to realize that even though their struggle is of material nature i.e. as a consequence of exploitation of working class but there should be something else in addition to this factor that could satisfy their psychological or spiritual void and that their Christian religion alone could not do this for them, when it came

to the matter of struggle against material and social oppression. For Anaya, Christian religion thinks too much about afterlife and the legend of Aztlan provides them an inspiration for struggle and a socio-political reactionary point of view. Myth of Aztlan calls for action, mobility and exploration against the passivity of Christian religion which alone could not represent the collective psyche and spiritual energies of a community needed for a unified endeavour for struggle and progress and therefore the myth of ancients is of paramount importance in their literature. The following excerpts can be compared for the different perspectives and stances regarding revolution and struggle that separates Church and myth Culture in mobilizing the movement.

Father Cayo groaned: You preach revolution, but you don't understand that the church can't join it! The Church has discussed movements like yours many times, and the orders are very explicit on this matter ... We are not to get mixed up in these political struggles! It's that simple. The work of church is to care for the souls of me; the complaints of the workers are fired up by the whims of radicals and the political affiliation of masses change from one day to the next (141).

The difference in the thinking of Clemente can be seen when he has returned back from the visionary experience as a changed man and makes a speech at the end of the novel:

Now the greatest tragedy is the paralysis which injustice and oppression inflict on our people! Tyranny sucks our dreams and turns them into nightmares, it dries the hope we have for our children and their future! We have endured enough. Let it end tonight (206)!

Wherever discrimination and injustice and oppression rear their ugly heads the fire can be called upon to burn them away !Wherever there is an honest man, a poor man ,an oppressed man ,the fire smoulders in the heart , ready to ignite and light his path (208) !

Myth criticism and magic realism in Anaya's Novel:

Going through a magical journey into his own soul, which is revelatory like an epiphany, where he comes to know about the collective conscience of his people, which gives him power to gather the strength of his people by being instrumental in synthesis of their traditional roots, past culture and rich legends with their turbulent socio-economic present, in a way past can be brought down to the present and become an inspiring and revelatory source of strength, dignity and assertion of identity, that a community collectively is blessed

with a mythic conscience and thus they can fight together against any socio-economic oppression or invasion

Today myth is used in a more self-conscious way and is an aesthetic mode of expression and reflection and every author or poet has a unique way of incorporating myth in literature and Anaya has rendered the mythic experience in most magical and surreal manner. The following excerpt pertains to that magical journey.

The old woman said to Clemente:

“Look at the rock! It is death to look anywhere except at the rockyou will find grain in the door of the sand ... you will find door to the mountain... you will find the seven wombs of the earth ...” She began to chant and the room began to spin slowly around the rock...

She pointed and again he looked at the rock and this time a melody drew him into the river in which the rock tumbled.

Each ghost clutched at him and cried for help...Deliver us Clemente Chavez! They cried (129).

In the following passage there is an illusion to Industrial Revolution and capitalist powers who manipulate the underprivileged ; a living metaphor for capitalism and its oppression in contemporary times. The myth alludes to “snakes of steel” that the Chicano community has to fight against.

Strike down the snakes of steel that bind our soul, the people cried . Deliver us from the oppression! Strike down injustice (83)!

Here Anaya makes an emphatic point about one’s roots that lead to salvation and deliverance

Everywhere the wind moaned with the name of their homelandin the stories of the past always the four directions were pointed out and in the centre stood Aztlan they walked to the land where the sun rises ...they found new signs and the signs ;pointed them back to the centre , back to Aztlan

Where? Clemente cried in pain, Oh where the source of my river is!

There, the wind answered, there where the seven springs from the sacred lake. There by the desert of the white herons (130)!

Time stood still, and in that enduring moment he felt the rhythm of the heart of aztlan beat to the measure of his own heart. Dreams and vision became reality, and reality was but the thin substance of myths and legends. A joyful power coursed from the dark womb-heart of the earth into his soul and he cried out ‘I AM AZTLAN!’ ...there was no special grace or deliverance in the pain he felt, only a thin bond of comradeship to the masses that floated down the

river of time into a new beginning. Knowing this he accepted death and let the water take its course.

Deliverance, the river moaned and cutting a new channel into the future it tossed him upon a mossy bank (131).

Chicano struggle, lost identity and economic crisis:

Besides being a socio-political reflection of the community across its long history, Chicano texts show an overpowering economically deprived and politically unstable society. A huge chunk of text and fiction which Chicanos have produced are overtly proletariat and progressive in nature. Although Chicanos write in the style and tradition of the Latino writers, which also happens to be their indigenous culture but these texts sometimes lean towards a tendency of propagandist and preaching. Chicano texts also differ in many ways from the Latin American and Mexican writers as the term "Chicano" itself is a subject of debate; an institution that has openly embraced the myth of American Dream and also justified and encouraged a hybrid state of the Mexican-American with a multicultural outlook that most of the Cultural and National writings have shown a great disagreement to as it goes against the Nationalist definition of the Native writers and also threatens identity and culture. Mexican and Latino writers are not even content with using a linguistically hybridized medium and totally have abrogated using "Spanglish" as using such a medium that makes use of the language of oppressor, in itself leads to a cultural erosion and also thoughts, emotions and experiences are best expressed and translated through the mother tongue in an unmediated form. Whereas Chicano texts are voraciously speaking about economic exploitation and oppression at the hands of American society and its capitalist agenda but at the same time Chicanos are also making use of past myth, legends and folklore to describe their endeavours and struggle for migration and upward mobility and thus the myth of their past collective history is moving in the direction of Cultural materialism, which makes their coalition of migration and myth only another instrument of economic exploitation against the Chicanos. So there is also a conflict within the Chicano society that arises from the different ideologies of Clementes and his family. Clementes is not happy with the cultural assimilation or the Anglicising of his family and especially his daughters. The term "Chicano" had negative connotations before the Chicano Movement, and still is viewed negatively and archaic by more conservative members of this community. At the one hand there is an open political and socialistic stance of the community and on the other hand they make use of traditional belief systems to reconstruct their collective past and justify the act of migration and also encourage and glorify the deliberate endurance of the community to migrate and leave their homeland, which ac-

According to the myth had bestowed upon them with power for discovery and meant exploring and progressive nature of the community contrary to this, Latino texts have tried to promote nationalism and increase in migration of Latino American is shown to be forced and betray a huge resistance to authoritarianism and exploitation. But Anaya's text vacillates between these two positions.

Critical study of myth consciousness and cultural memory in Heart of Aztlan:

Structuralism and Positivist thought has already shown inhibition towards recognizing any major role played by myth in mobilizing struggle or playing any positive role by framing it as a type of "false consciousness", through their reductionist approach. Especially theories of Claude Levi Strauss and after him, Louis Althusser's concept of ideology as the product of power and materialism in the society. According to Marxist critiques it is only the social dynamics of the society that constructs any form of consciousness.

Even though myth may be authentic and primordial in nature and having a spiritual significance but materialism in a way existed long before it's construct and existed as a desire for food, shelter and clothing and power is also one of the primordial attributes of a man and existed since man was conscious enough to live a community life and after that created civilizations and culture, thus historicising mythology and reducing it to a state of metanarratives.

When Latino Americans make use of myth, legends and folklore in the literature, it often asserts their identity and explores a state of collective being and way of Latino life that connects and binds them together, a place where magic and reality exist simultaneously but Anaya's texts profusely make use of myth for justifying communities collective decision for migration which is a consequence of Cultural materialism or a product of myth as an instrument of "cultural industry" for the Marxists that only treats myth as a form of ideology.

Culture is seen as the deepest impulse and origin of the "human spirit" as much as it was known for effectuating the institutions of society such as religion, state etc but Marxist did not believe in this belief system that can escape ideological biases until the more flexible When Latino Americans make use of myth, legends and folklore in the literature, it often asserts their identity and explores a state of collective being and way of Latino life that connects and binds them together, a place where magic and reality exist simultaneously but Anaya's texts profusely make use of myth for justifying communities pure culture and the commoditised one and shifting the attention from economy as the only facet of society. History before was never seen as overcoming of any superstition and ignorance by knowledge and reason. But Frankfurt school demanded revision of historical perspective around the notion of a relationship as a dichotomy between Society and nature but now as a

new relationship of economy and society. Cultural material theorists do give a space to the mental/natural reality of a society and also contend that the physical world puts a constraint on human behaviour. Although it believes that human behavior is a part of nature and can be understood using the methods of natural sciences but giving more importance to material reality as compared to the mental reality. Social Anthropologists who heavily rely on the Marxist theoretical studies also came up with another parameter in the relationship; not the base and superstructure but infrastructure, structure and superstructure. For them the internal structure comprised of the basis of the other two levels and includes basic needs of a man and how it interacts with other environment. But actual work in the field of validating culture and as a subject independent of economics to certain extent and comprehending it in terms of its collective memory, myth and as a source spirituality was the work of Frankfurt school's 'Dialectics of Enlightenment' popularized the cultural theory of literature. Culture theory gave much importance to culture as an important aspect of literary production and creative imagination of society as compared to the Cultural materialist's lopsided approach: an historicist approach to literature as the theoretical practice interprets literary texts as historical and cultural artefacts. Cultural material theory holds that most of the aspects of human culture can be explained in material terms. Such historical materialism, which is the basic thrust of Cultural materialism does not believe in individual consciousness or ideals but rather takes matter as fundamental and central substance of nature.

Class consciousness according to George Lukács, is the most fundamental thing behind any human collective struggle and is opposed to any psychological or anthropological concept of consciousness, individual or collective. For Marxists class consciousness is not an origin but a state of action to be realized and earned by understanding the concrete historical totality and the process or by having a holistic approach towards history. Proletariat struggle and class consciousness is thus never ensured according to Marxist theory and we need something extra that can fill this void; where we can mobilize society towards a change and revolution by evoking the spirit and soul of the community that breathes through their collective unconscious as the novel rightly gives the collective unconscious of the community; the metaphor of a gushing river that is a repository of their collective past and in continuity and Anaya professes an immense faith in collective unconscious that is symbolized by the past events retrieved through magical experience of Clementes and bring a metamorphosis and realization in him to act and resist against oppression by means of a revolution.

Theorising Cultural Revolution:

Although Frankfurt school avoided taking a stand on the precise relationship between the materialist and transcendental methods, which led to ambiguity in their writings and confusion among their readers, however Habermas's epistemology synthesizes these two traditions by showing that phenomenological and transcendental analysis can be included under a materialist theory of social evolution, while the materialist theory makes sense only as part of a quasi-transcendental theory of emancipatory knowledge that is the self-reflection of Cultural Revolution. The simultaneously empirical and transcendental nature of emancipatory knowledge becomes the foundation stone of critical theory. This emancipatory knowledge is an outcome of communication within a society that is mutually agreed upon and is in harmony with the mass psyche, reason and thoughts. We come across a similar situation in Anaya's novel when, Clements goes through a huge transformation and metamorphosis when he becomes conscious about his own culture and the recurrent problems they have faced and how they have been dealt in the past and he becomes a visionary who can bring a change in the society by resisting oppression unlike his previously naive and submissive nature before his surreal and metaphysical experience of his ancestral myth.

Cultural memory is the most important aspect of any displaced and dislocated and marginal culture that shows resistance to assimilation but Chicano's at the same time are moving towards multiculturalism, which is done more openly in the later texts of Chicano canon.

The first school of American Anthropology known as Historical Particularism also rejects the evolutionary model of culture and argued for the unique historical past of a community and tried to show how each culture is a collective representation of that unique history, those people share. This school of thought has left a wider scope for cultural development achieving same heights, through a different path that is unique to every society, a theory that we see constructively and sophisticatedly built throughout the plot of Anaya's Heart of Aztlán.

Notes:

For more discussion on Literary theory and Criticism,

See further,

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For better understanding of concepts,

Anthropological theory of Criticism, Theory of Archetypes by Frye, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Structuralism , Socialism, Cultural Materialism.

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