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The Politics of Rituals : An Analysis of the Power Politics behind the Rituals in D.H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent*

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Abstract:

Rituals play a very significant role in D.H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent*. This paper will analyze how the theatrically performed rituals, in spite of their professed religious purposes, are actually instruments of power politics. This alignment between rituals and power occur at two levels. On a personal level, making the central character impersonate a mythic god through theatricalized rituals, is a wish fulfillment for Lawrence of achieving a supreme unified being, whereby his ideological conflicts will be resolved. This is a fantastical projection of Lawrence's *will to power* than a logical political idea. On a political level, rituals are being used by Ramon and Cipriano, two leaders to win consensus so as to consolidate their dictatorial ventures. By using psychoanalytic theory and through comparison with rituals performed during far-right regimes, I shall try to prove that Ramon's religious movement has characteristics of a fascist uprising and to explain the reasons which make performance of rituals such an essential part of this movement. I shall then present Kate Leslie as the voice of resistance against this power politics finely disguised under the garb of rituals. Finally, I shall conclude by presenting *The Plumed Serpent* as a depiction of that dangerous condition when the boundary between ritualized theatrics and practical politics gets dissolved, thus paving way for the emergence of the fascist dictator.

Keywords: Rituals, Fascism, Will to Power, Collective Unconscious, Domination, Consensus

Fascism and Rituals :

History has revealed a close connection between theatrical presentation of rituals and dictatorial politics. Rituals are acts which are meant to connect to the very core of the human soul, the centre of his most elementary being. Naturally, any fascist dictatorial politics tries to exploit rituals as a mass-medium to perpetuate its ideology. A fascist regime consolidates its authority not only by military power but also by popular consensus and use of ritualistic theatre plays a major role in manufacturing consensus. Gunter Berghaus in his essay "The Ritual Core of Fascist Theatre: An Anthropological perspective" pointed out that Fascist dictator Mussolini himself advocated theatre as "the most direct means of arriving at the heart of the people" (Berghaus 50). The celebration of The Feast of The Grape in Mussolini's regime glorifying the Roman values of Fascist Italy and the Nazi pageants deifying Aryan values in the figure of Adolf Hitler are instances of dictatorial regimes exploiting rituals for its ends.

D.H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent* presents a detailed picture of such theatricalization of politics. Set in the period of Mexican Revolution, a landowner Don Ramon wants to give rise to a new cult by reviving the ancient Aztec myth of Quetzalcoatl and by replacing Christianity with the revived religion centering around Quetzalcoatl. To win consensus of the masses which mainly consist of aboriginal Indians for his grand project, he engages himself in elaborate rituals where he plays the role of Quetzalcoatl himself. This is accompanied by elaborate exotic costumes, music in the form of tom-toms and incantatory Hymns. However, Don Ramon's purpose, though insisted by Ramon as having a spiritual goal, is backed strongly by the military power wielded by a Mexican general, Don Cipriano who is also a co-founder of the cult and himself plays the role of another mythic God Huitzilopochtli.

Don Ramon through playing the role of Quetzalcoatl, projects himself as the supreme leader leading his followers to the goal of spiritual rebirth ---a state of supreme harmony between individual and the Universe, between body and mind, between Spirit and the Flesh. In spite of his avowed prophetic goal, it cannot be denied that the whole design is uncomfortably linked to the accumulation of power. The power politics behind the rituals can be viewed in two ways. Firstly, on a personal level, the rituals are expressions of wish fulfillment of power on the part of author D.H. Lawrence himself. Secondly, on a political level, the rituals can be viewed as tools used by Don Ramon in his personal quest for political power. And then, it has to be kept in mind that personal and political aspects of power are inextricably linked together.

Ritual as a tool of personal wish fulfillment for Lawrence :

Many critics have discussed the duality inherent in Lawrence's metaphysics and also the duality of his own personality. On the personal plane, Lawrence was torn between mainly mind and the body, between the intellect and the instinct. On a political level, as Peter Scheckner in his book *Class, Politics and the Individual : A Study of the Major Works of D.H. Lawrence* has shown, Lawrence was torn between a sincere desire for social commitment and his need for individuality complemented by his fear of the so called mob-mentality which, according to Lawrence, any ideology of social commitment generally entails. Nearly all of Lawrence's earlier novels reflect this duality on both personal and social levels. In this context it needs to be stated that all his earlier novels had either the central character or certain other important character reflecting Lawrence's own conflicts through their speeches and actions. This duality of Lawrence was reflected in Paul Morel (the hero of Lawrence's autobiographical *Sons and Lovers* [1913]) being torn between the communal working-class life symbolized by his miner father and the individualist cultured life symbolized by his mother of which he finally chose the latter. However, Paul was never satisfied and had always a sense of suffocation due to the lack of a community and it is only after the agonizing experience of his mother's death, he was free to walk towards the "faintly humming, glowing town". (*Sons and Lovers* 420). This conflict of Lawrence was further aggravated by the disintegrating influence of First World War. This was reflected in *Women in Love* (1920) through his spokesperson, Rupert Birkin's nihilist attitude towards life, in his desire to escape from the money-oriented civilization but in his not knowing where actually to go. *Aaron's Rod* (1922) reflected Lawrence's desperate disenchantment with society where the protagonist Aaron Sisson,

formerly a union official of the local coal mines, had rejected society altogether until the final rejuvenation by the leadership principle of Rawdon Lilly.

It is in this context that *The Plumed Serpent* (henceforth cited as *PS*) needs to be assessed. In *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) Lawrence attempts to synthesize all his conflicts and tries to create a supreme harmony between society and individual. And use of rituals play a vital part in this attempt. By making his spokesperson Don Ramon impersonate an aboriginal God, Lawrence makes a final attempt at gaining power the lack of which has been reflected in his earlier novels. Don Ramon's speech during the consecration ritual of Quetzalcoatl in the erstwhile Christian Church, reveal an attempt at a supreme harmony which will lead to the transcendence of the demanding pressures of both mind and body.

“A man shall take the wine of his spirit and the blood of his heart, the oil of his belly and the seed of his loins, and offer them first to the Morning Star.” (*PS* 356)

The whole ritual of consecration of Quetzalcoatl is then a symbolic enactment of the ultimate fantasy of Lawrence himself--to attain the “Morning Star” (*PS* 355), the sense of supreme peace and strength which can be attained only through a ritualistic sacrificing of the disintegrating forces of mind and body at the altar of a supreme Being. Rituals, for Lawrence, is then an uncovering of the vital core of one's inner being and is a reaction against the self-preserving instincts of the conscious social mind and the social body. About use of rituals Daniel Albright in *Personality and Impersonality*. Lawrence, Woolf and Mann commented that “ritual is the attempt to express something alien to oneself by altering deliberately the configurations of one's body and mind”. (Albright 59). This wish for annihilation of the outer self followed by an inner rejuvenation, is reflected also in Lawrence's essay “Autobiographical Fragments” where the writer while visiting his childhood countryside, Newthorpe suddenly falls asleep awaking from which he experiences a death-like trance and he contemplates his dead physical body from outside.

“I roused a little, and saw a grayish pale nearness that I recognized was my body, and something terrible moving upon it and making sensations in it” (*Late Essays and Articles* 58)

The use of rituals in *The Plumed Serpent* is a wish fulfillment of this urge. Lawrence, transcending the Birkin and Aaron phases of his ideological crisis, has a vision of himself as the supreme prophet and is willing to sacrifice both instinct and reason in the process just as Don Ramon metamorphoses into a mythical godhead but at the expense of his social identity. It is a power politics on the personal level and ritual eases this change, acts as mechanism for coping with the fears and uncertainties that are associated with such an ideological shift.

The Politics of Myth:

The revival of an aboriginal mythic God and establishing himself in the role of that God through elaborate rituals, is a strategic ploy devised by Don Ramon to project his messianic paternal image onto the aboriginal Indians. The portrayal of the Indians in the novel is a curious one in the sense that Lawrence undoubtedly viewed something

disintegrative in them. Again and again the adjective “dark” has been used to describe them in different contexts. In the chapter titled “The Lake”, Kate Leslie’s journey to the Indian-populated centre of Ramon’s new religion, is presented by Lawrence as a journey into a “demon world”(*PS* 93) and repeated use of “dark” is being noticed.

“The platform below the Pullman was all dark. But at the back of the train she could see the glare of the first-class windows, on the dark station” (*PS* 94)

And again one line after the repetition occurs when Kate can “feel the faint bristling apprehensions of all the Mexicans in their dark berths”.(*PS* 94))

These repeated use of the word “dark” refer actually to the darkness of the Indians’ primitive souls, their mindless sensuous nature which though convey to outsiders like Kate some mysterious charm, makes the Indians vulnerable to fall prey to Don Ramon’s dictatorial venture. Lawrence’s notion that the aboriginal’s purely sensual psyche has something self-destructive, can be noticed previously also in *Women in Love* when Birkin after witnessing a statue of an African woman in Halliday’s apartment, reflects that the destruction of the African culture took place “since the relation between the senses and the outspoken mind had broken leaving the experience all in one sort, mystically sensual”. (*Women in Love* 253)

C.G. Jung analyzes the connection between myths, magic, rituals and the “collective unconscious” of the primitive race in the essay “The Role of the Unconscious” (1918).

“A thought appears to him, he does not think of it; it appears to him in the form of a projected sensuous perception, almost like a hallucination, or at least like an extremely vivid dream .For this reason a thought, for the primitive, can superimpose itself on sensuous reality to such an extent that if a European were to behave in the same way we should say he was mad”(*Civilization in Transition* 11)

Jung’s use of the words “hallucination” and “dreams” imply a process of substitution of a real perception by a sensuous symbol. In case of the Indians in *The Plumed Serpent* it is this irrational primitive psyche, totally dependent on symbols for perception , that make the Indians susceptible to the rituals of Don Ramon.

If Jung’s notion of connection between mythical archetypal figures and a race’s collective unconscious is considered , then Ramon’s revival of the Quetzalcoatl myth is a strategy to engage, control and manipulate the collective unconscious of the aboriginals. In this context, it needs to be mentioned that the position of the aboriginals was largely a marginal one within the larger Hispanic Mexico. The anti-Hispanic element of Ramon’s cult is quite evident when he says to Kate :---

“And each new shoot that comes up overthrows a Spanish church....”(*PS* 88)

The cult of the mythic God creates among the aboriginals a false sense of wholeness, a sense of integration within the larger Mexican life. The elaborate rituals of consecration ceremony of Quetzalcoatl , the use of tom-toms, costumes, incantatory Hymns while on while on hand endow the Indians’ with an Utopian sense of unity, on the other hand finely disguises the political ambition of the perpetrators of the cult.

Ramon intentionally escalates the existential crisis among the Indians by invoking through his Hymns fear of death and destruction--- a primal fear which has haunted the aboriginal mind since ages.

“But have you seen a dead man, how his star has gone out of him?”

.....

So it will leave you, and you will hang like a gourd on the vine of life

With nothing but rind :

Waiting for the rats of the dark to come and gnaw your inside.” (*PS* 355- 356)

Though the subject matter of the hymns is mystical, it should be noted that the terror is conveyed through sensual imageries –something which will be much more effective on the aboriginal psyche. Regarding the exploitation of myth during the Fascist regime, Berghaus commented that translating “fascist ideology into a mythical language and actualising these myths through ritual performances was a far more effective way of producing consent and approval of the presented message than rational propaganda could ever hope to achieve”. (Berghaus 50). The purpose is to drag the Indians into an existential crisis from which they will be rescued by the “living Quetzalcoatl”(*PS* 356)), that is Ramon himself as their supreme saviour, their “Lord of two ways”.(*PS* 356) Following Jung’s ideas, Berghaus points out that just as an adult in a moment of crisis relives his child-like need for a parental figure, similarly a civilization in crisis also searches for a prophetic leader as a substitute for the parental figure. This accounts for the Indian’s increasing dependence on Ramon. The ritualistic theatricalization of Ramon’s assumption of power thus creates a normalizing effect. The ritualistic enactment of power, like when the Indians are commanded during the consecration ceremony to “salute Quetzalcoatl” (*PS* 357) with the accompanying gesture of thrusting up the arms, endow Ramon’s assumption of power a sense of inevitability . Analysis of use of rituals during the Nazi and Fascist regime show that rituals play the similar role in presenting an event in history as something fated to occur and in presenting a dictator in the role of a supreme prophet.

Another significant aspect of the rituals in *The Plumed Serpent* is Ramon’s presenting Christianity as something inimical to the ontological supremacy of the Indians, as the “Other”. The chapter titled “The Opening of the Church” portrays ritualistic removal of all Christian pictures and statues from the church followed by a ritualistic assumption of power by Ramon in the role Quetzalcoatl. The Hymns of Quetzalcoatl also present Christianity as a religion which has not been able to deliver the Mexicans the promised salvation and hence the need to replace it. The ritualistic removal of everything Christian from the church has something totalitarian about it. The way one by one images and statues are being removed with strict decorum and discipline, justifies Ramon’s taking hold of the Church as something fated and presents suppression of any contrary views as something normal and necessary. The clue to this lies in Berghaus’s analysis of projecting some group or sect as the eternal enemy by a fascist dictator. Using Jung’s ideas, Berghaus explains that “when crisis leads to uncontrollable fears, the

‘sane’ half distances itself from the threatened part of the self, and schizophrenia, paranoia, projection of the phobic object onto imagined enemies take place.” (Berghaus 43). Here the “imagined enemies” are Spanish Christians, just as those in Nazi regime were Jews. In fascist regimes the same phenomenon occurred in the sense that many Christian symbols were taken out of their context and integrated into the then secular political system. The clue to this lies in Benito Mussolini’s projection of Fascism as a “civic and political belief, a religion, a militia, a spiritual discipline, which has had--like Christianity—its confessors, its testifying witnesses, its saints”. (Berghaus 53)

Language and Music of the Rituals:

Rituals are often accompanied by repetitive music which creates a hypnotic effect on the audience. The principal purpose is to break down the conscious self, the rational aspect of the mind and to induce a semi-conscious trance. By eliminating the conscious self fascism finds it easy to perpetuate its ideology within the subconscious of the audience which is again much more effective in winning loyal support than rational propaganda. In *The Plumed Serpent* there is the constant beating of tom-tom drums at periodic intervals which serve the same purpose. For Kate Leslie, the drum sound symbolizes the all-consuming totalitarianism of Ramon’s cult, the supreme temptation to annihilate the rational mind and to immerse in the nihilistic pursuance of *will to power*. Throughout the novel, Kate’s struggle is with this temptation which the drum-beatings repeatedly try to invoke.

“Then the two drums were speeding up, beating against one another with the peculiar uneven savage rhythm, which at first seems no rhythm, and then seems to contain a summons almost sinister in its power, acting on the helpless blood direct.” (PS 349)

The incantatory rhythm of Quetzalcoatl Hymns complemented by the drum beatings increases the hypnotic effect on the aboriginal psyche. The Hymns use the same mystical language as Christian hymns and Ramon is once again using a tried and tested structure with just substitution of the Christian content with pagan ones.

So the mystical as well as symbolic language of the Hymns serve two purposes. Firstly, on a political level, the language leads the audience towards an apparently non-political spiritual arena but in the process blinds the aboriginal audience to the political project of Ramon. Secondly, on a personal level, the mystical language is an expression of the *will to power* of Ramon and through him of his creator, Lawrence as well. Albright about the connection between language and personality commented that those “aspects of literary act which are the most physical, the deliberate choice of figures of speech, the choice of words are the aspects most like the glossy shell of the physical body or the ego”. (Albright 53) So, by mystification of language in the Hymns, Ramon intentionally wishes to annihilate his benign social personality as well as the rational aspect of his mind and to metamorphose into all-powerful Quetzalcoatl, the Omnipotent leader. For Lawrence too, in language of the Hymns his previous contradictions between Spirit and Flesh, between reason and instinct can be temporarily reconciled, at least within fragile boundary of an work of art and he can enjoy his “Morning Star”(PS 355) for the time being.

Kate as the Voice of Resistance :

Throughout the novel Kate Leslie is again and again tempted to immerse herself in the ritualistic power-game of Ramon. Right at the beginning of the novel Kate had to witness the brutal incident of a bull-fight where the graphic brutalization of a horse was being cheered by the audience in a ritualistic ecstasy. This was the first temptation for Kate to lose her reason and conscience in the collective instinctual ecstasy but she was repulsed by the episode so much that while her American friends were glued to the mass-frenzy, she walked out of the stadium. Then her journey to Ramon's place across Lake Sayula is full of symbolism and is deliberately infused with a sense of awe and terror with everything from landscape to aboriginal figures tempting Kate with their innate "darkness". Readers finally get to know the significance of all these indications when Ramon offers Kate to directly participate in the ritual by impersonating Goddess Malintzi.

For Lawrence undoubtedly a close connection existed between leadership politics and male domination on women. It is generally believed by critics that around 1917-1918 Lawrence's outlook towards politics and gender underwent certain changes. Lawrence's frustration of unavailability of any political solution to synthesize his earlier contradictions was gradually being reflected onto women. By the end of *Aaron's Rod* (henceforth cited as *AR*) the power principle which Lilly prescribes to Aaron is definitely marked with an anti-feminine stance.

"And men must submit to the greater soul in a man, for their guidance : and women must submit to the positive power-soul in man, for their being." (*AR* 312)

The connection between male supremacy and leadership politics is strongly established in *The Plumed Serpent*. Here both the Indians and Kate constitute the "Other" and though both are needed for the working of the totalitarian machinery, both have to be subordinated to the leadership of the prophet, the supreme Man.

Quetzalcoatl's consecration ceremony is infested with anti-feminine elements. Like when Don Cipriano as God Huitzilopochtli commands :--

"Women must go down the centre, and cover their faces. And they may sit upon the floor.

But men must stand erect" (*PS* 353)

By these statements Cipriano is reinforcing the stereotypical submissiveness and passivity of women as their duty. However, the men's "standing erect" does not negate their inferior status compared to the leader. Their physical strength will just be exploited by perpetrators of the cult to subdue any political opposition. In a word, they will be made to act as pawns in the dictatorial venture of Ramon and Cipriano. As women cannot provide that manpower they are unnecessary and "may sit". In this context, Ramon's indifferent attitude towards his wife, Carlota should be noted when she, being a devout Christian, frenziedly opposes consecration ceremony of Quetzalcoatl inside the previously Christian Church. Ramon's indifferent attitude towards Carlota is both a rejection of her womanhood as well as her different religious faith thereby reconfirming the alignment

between patriarchy and dictatorial politics in Lawrence's ideology of that time. Kate being a woman herself quickly fathoms the male-chauvinism in Ramon's rituals.

"Only his brows frowned a little, from his smooth, male forehead. His old connections were broken. She could hear him say : *There is no star between me and Carlota.*—And how terribly true it was !" (*PS* 359)

For Ramon the extreme *will to power* has resulted in rupturing of boundary between reality and fancy and rituals are now for him the only reality. The role of Quetzalcoatl is for him the only identity and thus his social wife does not mean anything to him anymore. In Lawrence's later novels like *The Woman Who Rode Away* emancipated women characters would be subjected to sadistic violence under the garb of symbolic rituals and Lawrence's real gamesmanship would be in making the women will their own humiliation.

The marriage between Don Cipriano and Kate is not a normal marriage and the elaborately ritualized marriage is actually presented as between Huitzilopochtli and Malintzi. Throughout the novel Cipriano has relentlessly tried to make Kate agree to marry him and as Cipriano's later attitudes reveal, the marriage is not out of love but out of sheer desire to possess Kate. The ritual of impersonation allows Cipriano to possess Kate without the responsibilities that a normal marriage demands. Cipriano uses the role of Huitzilopochtli to exploit Kate as it is only to Huitzilopochtli that Kate as Malintzi is betrothed and thus the social Cipriano does not have any need for her. Cipriano cares neither for Kate's emotional fulfillment nor for her physical fulfillment (her orgasm is denied by Cipriano). But then like the woman in the novella, *The Woman Who Rode Away*, here also Kate, is relentlessly exposed to heavy concoction of hypnotic music, incantatory hymns, exotic costumes, the mysterious light-effect (by use of colourful candles), curious perfumes, and most importantly to the ritual enactment of power. These are all parts of rituals aimed at benumbing the rational and emancipated aspects of her psyche, so as to make her finally say :---

"What do I care if he kills people? He is Huitzilopochtli.....(*PS* 410)

But still if there is a voice in the novel which opposes the entire fascist machinery, it is that of Kate. Right from her repulsion of the bull-fight episode she never totally sacrifices her individuality at altar of Quetzalcoatl just as the Indians have done. Her staying back in Mexico is principally out of her realization of the meaninglessness of the European civilization which is centered around money rather than because of real belief in Ramon's cult. Against the tremendous pressure for merging in the ritualized ecstasy, against the powerful claim of blood-oneness, Kate still asserts her individuality:--

"My blood is my own. *Noli me tangere*" (*PS* 433)

At the very end of the novel Kate's last statement to Ramon is :----

"You won't let me go!"(*PS* 462)

Even though the statement reflects some deeper urge within Kate not to leave Ramon's project, at the same time it signifies that some part of her psyche can never accept the

machinery. She can never be completely in one with Ramon's ideas and something external is forcing her to stay back. Kate, thus, represents the critical aspect of D.H. Lawrence's mind which though overshadowed by the supreme temptation of *will to power*, can still see the horrors of dictatorial politics.

Violence enacted:

The ritual execution of the four prisoners by Cipriano is significant because for the first time the spectacle which Ramon and Cipriano have till now built up, is spilling over to real violence. This is an important break in the novel and readers suddenly have an insight into the evil innate in any fascist regime and which remains finely disguised because of the normalizing effect of ritual performances. The comparison of the prisoners as grey dogs fit to be executed, the mechanism of execution with the prisoners each being given a leaf and pardoning of one with a green leaf as a pardon from Malintzi-- this elaborately ritualized manner of execution serves two purposes. Firstly, it is a symbolic enactment of the Omnipotence of the dictators, presenting them as the "Lords of Life" (PS 394) and the "Masters of Death" (PS 394). Secondly, the dramatization of murder provide justification to an otherwise routine execution of rebels by a dictator.

Conclusion:

So there is no doubt that a fascist machinery is operating in *The Plumed Serpent* but question arises how much of this fascist political ideology Lawrence himself did espouse. The clue lies again in the use of rituals in the novel. No other novel of Lawrence presents such a delicate co-existence of theatrical rituals and political reality. Through the rituals Lawrence projects his fantasy of ordinary people's "fathomless submission to the heroic soul in a greater man" (AR 312) onto the real political scenario of Mexico. It is true Lawrence's main goal was ontological, rather than political. Probably Lawrence meant the rituals to be taken purely in a symbolic sense. Eugene Goodheart in *The Utopian Vision of D.H. Lawrence* asserts that "Lawrence was unable to think politically because he could not regard human relationships as anything other than personal relations or impersonal encounters between the gods that inhabit two persons". (Goodheart 143). That Lawrence believed in maintaining a critical distance between the artist and the characters of his art can be understood from his comment regarding the forcing of passion by Dostoevskian characters in contrast to the characters of Ernest Hemingway. He wrote that the Dostoevskian characters were "only acting up, trying to act feelings because [they] haven't really got any" (*Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D.H. Lawrence* 389). Likewise, Lawrence may be aware of the 'acting up' of rituals by Ramon and Cipriano and the dark political motivations underneath the feelings invoked by the rituals.

Nevertheless, projection of ontological fantasy of Superior Being onto real political arena is a dangerous trend. Such projection dissolves the essential boundary between religion and politics. Religion allows an inflow of sentiments onto the political machinery and which in turn is exploited by a Fuehrer or a Duce or a Caudillo, who present himself as the supreme leader with his religious duty to unify the masses on the basis of those sentiments. That is why religious revivalism has a strong historical connection with far-right politics. For example, Iron Guard Movement in Romania promoted Orthodox

Christianity and even in Fascism and Nazism the dictators were frequently presented through ritual performances as religious godheads.

However, it may be concluded with the positive indication that Lawrence was slowly realizing the futility of follower-leader ideal as a resolution of all political and ontological conflicts. In a letter to Rolf Gardiner, Lawrence wrote :---

“The reciprocity of power is obsolete when you get down to the basis of life, to the depth of warm creative stir, there is no power. It is never.”(*The Letters of D.H. Lawrence* 307)

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