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THE COUNT AND THE VETAL: A SEARCH FOR ORIGIN

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Abstract: Myths and legends always have some universal acceptance-from the gods to the monsters. Though every myth finds its root in its respective culture, still one cannot deny the fact that all the myths and legends of our different cultures are somehow connected. From the surface level, they have different origins. But a thorough analysis of their histories will uncover the fact that those myths and legends have many things in common despite their origins. The concept of a vampire or blood-sucking monster is one of them. To the world, Stoker's Dracula is the iconic representation of the legend and his origin lies in Transylvania. But, if we dug deep, it can be found that the origin of vampire legend may rest in our eastern cultures. Stoker himself was inspired by Indian 'Vetal' to create his monster 'Dracula'. In my paper, I have attempted to bring out the origin of vampire legend by analyzing the two iconic characters of 'Count Dracula' and 'Vetal' and the texts of Stoker's 'Dracula' and Richard Burton's 'Vikram and the Vampire'.

Keywords: Vampire, Legend, Myth, Vetal, Dracula.

"...a preternatural being of a malignant nature (in the original and usual form of the

belief, a re-animated corpse, supposed to seek nourishment, or do harm, by sucking the blood of sleeping persons, a man or woman abnormally endowed with similar habits." (Oxford Dictionaries, www.oxforddictionaries.com)

The legends of vampires are universal. They are the creatures of the night- the embodiment of evil and utter darkness. From ancient times, vampires have been an integral part of myth and lore and from myth, they have found their ways into literature. Mostly, people associate vampires with the 'west' as it has a large variety of vampire legends throughout various countries- from ancient Rome and Greece to Victorian England. But, it is to be noted that the origin of vampires is rooted in the 'east'. The very first depiction of a so-called vampire has been found on an 'Assyrian bowl' where the picture of a man having sex with a headless vampire is engraved (Garza, 17). In modern works of literature, the vampires are given some special attributes, apart from bloodsucking. Though they look like normal human beings, they cannot tolerate sunlight. They are seen as a new species rather than the servants of the devil (as depicted in the legends). But these newly formulated ideas are narrowing the broader aspects of the original universal

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vampire myth. All vampires drink blood, but all of them cannot be categorized under one roof. There are various vampire legends, both in the east and the west, with their local flavors. In India, the vampire theme can be found in 'Atharva Veda' and in the tales of 'Baital Pachisi' (Shepherd, 1). Ch'ing Shih, the vampire legend of China, closely resembles its western counterparts (Garza, 7). And there are also the Mexican legends of vampires- 'Ciuateteo' (who are only females) (Shepherd, 1). According to Richard Noll, the vampire myth may have entered Western Europe via Turkey and Balkans from India. The Slavic and the Eastern Orthodox Christians of Turkey occupied Europe have circulated this myth to the western part. At the end of the 18th century, the concept of vampirism became prevalent in New England, and from that phenomenon came the masterpiece of Bram Stoker- 'Dracula' (Noll, 38). It has been said earlier that the myth of vampires had originated in the east. This paper will attempt to bridge the east with the west by comparing the myths as portrayed in Indian 'Baital Pachisi' and British 'Dracula'.

The legend of the vampire has been a subject of superstition, folklore, and myth throughout the whole world. According to Brown-

"Supernatural beings that visit humans and animals during the night to feed on their blood or other life-giving forces are a widespread and persistent belief. Legends of such creatures have been reported for various cultures almost worldwide, including China, India, Malaya, the

Philippines, Arabia, Turkey, Africa, and Europe." (Noll, 96)

According to early eastern beliefs, a vampire is either the living dead (it can be a resurrected corpse) or the spirit of a dead body that leaves the grave at night to roam the land of the living to feed on them. (11, Guiley). But the term vampire itself came much later. During 1732, the term 'vampire' found its way to English culture from French and German legends of vampire cultured in Eastern Europe.

In this paper, we have to understand both worlds- the East and the West- and their viewpoints towards vampire legend by discussing 'Dracula' and 'Vetal'. In literature, some early examples of works based on vampires are John Polidori's 'The Vampire' (1819), James Malcolm Rymer's 'Varney, the Vampire' (1845-47) and Sheridan le Fanu's 'Carmilla' (1872). But none of them has reached the zenith of popularity created by Stoker in his novel 'Dracula' (1897). Brown has stated that "with the publication of Bram Stoker's Dracula in 1897, the vampire mystique reached a new height from which it has never descended." (107). Most of the popularity came from the character of Count Dracula himself. Guiley has pointed out,

"No matter how great the popularity of other vampires, Count Dracula remains the definitive human bloodsucker. No other character has eclipsed him... There is always yet another tale that can be told of the most famous monster of all." (Guiley, 84)

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It took almost six years, for Stoker, to create his iconic vampire in all his glories. After analyzing historically, the lineage of Dracula can be traced back to the 15th century (Rickels, 11). The historical figure of Vlad III, Dracula, inherited the title from his father. His father was a member of the 'Order of the Dragon' made by Roman Emperor Sigismund of Luxemburg to stop the Turkish invasion in Europe. 'Dracul', in the 15th century, meant 'dragon'. But now, according to the modern roman vocabulary, it means 'the devil'. The title 'Dracula' of Vlad III represented the meaning 'Son of the Dragon'; but, eventually. It was transformed into 'son of the devil'. Although the infamous Vlad III or Vlad the impaler had been a role model for Stoker to create his iconic villain, still he was also influenced by the actual legends of vampire also- both from the East and the West. (Shepherd, 4)

One such influence is the story of 'Vetal' from Indian lore. The character of Vetal is an integral part of the Sanskrit literary work 'Baital Pachisi' (Shepherd, 1). 'Vetal' or 'Baital' is a strange ghoulish-vampire hybrid. He is a living corpse hanging from the tree. The plot deals with the adventures of King Vikramaditya and the Vetal. The King had promised a tantric sorcerer that he would capture the 'vetal', a vampire spirit who could inhabit and animate dead bodies. The King had to face many difficulties in bringing Vetal to the sorcerer. The whole journey was full of stories and riddles. The King had to answer the questions incorrectly to capture the vampire.

But the King was required to speak if he knew the correct answer, otherwise, his head would burst. Wise king Vikramaditya knew all the answers; therefore the cycle of catching and releasing the vetal continued for twenty-four times. At last, at the twenty-fifth attempt, the king failed to answer the question and the vampire allowed him to take him to the sorcerer. This Sanskrit story was translated in English by Sir Richard F. Burton, a famous British explorer, geographer, writer, translator, and orientalist. The name of the translation is 'Vikram and the Vampire' (1870). Isabel Burton, wife of Sir Richard Burton, in her 'Preface' to the book of her husband, wrote, "The Baital-Pachisi, or Twenty-five Tales of a Baital is the history of a huge Bat, Vampire, or Evil Spirit which inhabited and animated dead bodies." (Burton, 12)

'Baital-Pachisi' or Burton's 'Vikram and the Vampire' (1870) was written before 'Dracula' by Stoker (1897). So, naturally, Vetal is one of the original ancestors of Stoker's Count. They are both vampires and undead. But in 'Dracula', we see the Count with all his vampiric powers; wherein 'Vikram and the Vampire', the Vetal shows some characteristics of vampirism. Stoker's family had a history with India as they came to the country to serve. During that time Stoker himself became fascinated with Indian occult. He had met Sir Richard Burton and studied his book 'Vikram and the Vampire' and the original 'Baital Pachisi', thoroughly, to create his masterpiece. But, there are no direct similarities between the Count and the Vetal.

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These two characters represent two different cultures and two different continents. But the underlying base factors are the same for both legends.

The setting is important for both stories as the background heightens the thrill. At the beginning of the novel 'Dracula', the protagonist Jonathan Harker describes the environment of his journey,

“As the evening fell it began to get very cold, and the growing twilight seemed to merge into one dark mistiness—the gloom of the trees, oak, beech, and pine, though in the valleys which ran deep between the spurs of the hills, as we ascended through the Pass, the dark fires stood out here and there against the background of late lying snow. Sometimes, as the road was cut through the pine woods that seemed in the darkness to be closing down upon us, great masses of greyness, which here and there bestrewed the trees, produced a peculiarly weird and solemn effect, which carried on the thoughts and grim fancies engendered earlier in the evening, when the falling sun-set threw into strange relief the ghost-like clouds which amongst the Carpathians seem to wind ceaselessly through the valleys.” (Stoker, 13)

Nature plays a very important role in all such legends as well as the stories of this kind. In Stoker's 'Dracula', natural phenomenon symbolizes the nature of the plot as well as the character of the Count. Most of the vampire legends deal with desolate places, ruined castles, dark forests, abandoned

chapels, huge mountain ranges. 'Dracula' is the fine example of this-

“In the gloom, the courtyard looked of considerable size, and as several dark ways led from it perhaps seemed bigger than it really is. I have not yet been able to see it by daylight...I stood close to a great door, old and studded with large iron nails, and set in a projecting doorway of massive stone. I could see even in the dim light that the stone was massively carved, but that carving had been much worn by time and weather...I stood in silence where I was, for I did not know what to do. Of bell or knocker, there was no sign; through these frowning walls and dark window openings, it was not likely that my voice could penetrate. The time I waited seemed endless, and I felt doubts and fears crowding upon me.” (Stoker, 22)

The massive and dark structure of Castle Dracula, from the beginning, was enough for Jonathan Harker to question about grim scenario he was in. Vampires are creatures of the dark; therefore the places they inhabit must reflect the same point. Those places should not have human contact and that is why they are situated in remote lands. It is also evident in Burton's 'Vikram and the Vampire',

“The darkness of the night was frightful, the gloom deepened till it was hardly possible to walk. The clouds opened their fountains, raining so that you would say they could never rain again. Lightning blazed forth with more than the light of day, and the roar of

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the thunder caused the earth to shake. Baleful gleams tipped the black cones of the trees and fitfully scampered like fireflies over the waste.” (Burton, 34)

It is a scene of the natural calamity which is only indicating the supernatural elements that dominate the atmosphere. The Count and the Vetal, both of them, are creatures of the night. Therefore, before entering into their world people must face the terror of nature itself. These natural scenarios work as a warning as well as entry points. Not only nature but also animals, natural and supernatural, become a part of the dreadful atmosphere. Stoker has continually connected the Count with lesser animals- mainly wolves. Wolves are the gate-keepers of Count's domain. They are like his hunting dogs. Howling of wolves accompanied Jonathan Harker throughout his nightmarish visit to Count's castle. He witnessed the ferocity of the wolves when he was inside the coach during his journey to Castle Dracula,

“But just then the moon, sailing through the black clouds, appeared behind the jagged crest of a beetling, pine-clad rock, and by its light, I saw around us a ring of wolves, with white teeth and lolling red tongues, with long, sinewy limbs and shaggy hair. They were a hundred times more terrible in the grim silence which held them than even when they howled.” (Stoker, 20)

In Burton's 'Vikram and the Vampire', the description of the road to 'smashana' also had many such terrors. Burton has vividly

portrayed the same scenario that has influenced Stoker, “Unclean goblins dogged the travelers and threw themselves upon the ground in their path and obstructed them in a thousand different ways. Huge snakes, whose mouths distilled blood and black venom, kept clinging around their legs in the roughest part of the road...”(Burton, 34)

It is clear that those who entered the world of the 'evil' had to face the servants of that 'evil'. In all vampire myths, animals have integral roles. They are creatures of the rational natural world. So, in a way, they are also connected to the supernatural world. Wolves, dogs, cats, rats, and finally bats are deeply connected to vampire legends. In most of the cases, the lesser animals were psychologically controlled by the malevolent evil powers.

To understand the connection between the Count and the Vetal, we have to find their common vampire traits. Count Dracula is the perfect portrayal of a vampire; he has the iconic physical features of a polished vampire. In the novel, Jonathan Harker has described the physical appearance of the Count very vividly,

“His face was a strong, a very strong, aquiline, with high bridge of the thin nose and peculiarly arched nostrils, with lofty domed forehead, and hair growing scantily round the temples but profusely elsewhere. His eyebrows were very massive, almost meeting over the nose, and with bushy hair that seemed to curl in its own profusion. The mouth, so far as I

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could see it under the heavy moustache, was fixed and rather cruel-looking with peculiarly sharp white teeth. These protruded over the lips, whose remarkable ruddiness showed astonishing vitality in a man of his years. For the rest, his ears were pale, and at the tops extremely pointed. The chin was broad and strong, and the cheeks firm though thin.” (Stoker,26)

This is indeed a description of a gentleman from a royal lineage. The Count did come from a royal bloodline, but that didn't change the fact he was a creature of the night, not a normal human being. Vampires are undead. They are the living dead and they can have various distinct physical forms. Though the Count was very stunning physically, when Jonathan Harker started to come closer to him, the truth started to reveal itself gradually, “The nails were long and fine, and cut to a sharp point. As the Count leaned over me and his hands touched me, I could not repress a shudder. It may have been that his breath was rank, but a horrible feeling of nausea came over me, which, do what I would, I could not cancel.” (Stoker,27)

This was the first evidence that the Count was different from Jonathan and other human beings in a mysterious way. The bad smell of his breath signifies that Count Dracula might be a person or creature associated with the undead. Now, if we look at the description of Vetal, we will see that the Indian vampire doesn't possess the elegance of the Count. It is only natural. On the surface level, the Count is

an aristocrat. The vampire part hides behind that surface. Jonathan Harker was able to see through it. In the case of Vetal there is no such coating. Because he is one of the ancient ones-without any dual personality,

“Its eyes, which were wide open, were of a greenish-brown, and never twinkled; its hair was also brown, and brown was its face-three several shades which, notwithstanding, approached one another in an unpleasant way, as in an over-dried cocoa-nut. Its body was thin and ribbed like a skeleton or a bamboo framework, and as it held on to a bough, like a flying fox, by the toe-tips, its drawn muscles stood out as if they were ropes of coir. Blood it appeared to have none, or there would have been a ??????? Determination of that curious juice to the head....” (Stoker,46)

So, like the Count himself, Vetal also has a thin bloodless figure. The difference is skin color. It is justified. The origin of Vetal lies in India-a tropical country, where the Count is from Eastern Europe. There are more similarities,

“...as the Raja handled its skin, it felt icy cold and clammy as might a snake. The only sign of life was the whisking of a ragged little tail much resembling a goat's.” (Burton,47)

So, basically, the Count and the Vetal are both undead. That is why their bodies are as cold as ice. Jonathan Harker was not, at first, able to identify the Count as a vampire, because he was not aware of the legend. But

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king Vikramaditya knew, seeing the creature, that it was a vampire,

“Judging from these signs the brave king at once determined the creature to be a Baital- a Vampire.” (Burton, 47)

So, according to Burton, there were the traits associated with vampires in general. Stoker’s Dracula came much later than the Vetala. So, it can be said that Stoker modified his Count based on these general characteristics of the vampire.

The only notable characteristic that separates the Count from the Vetala is their natures. Count Dracula is essentially evil and his lust for blood transcends his cruelty. On the other hand, the Vetala is not evil from a general point of view. Like the Count, he doesn't have a lust for blood or turning others into a vampire. It is just a spirit that inhabits dead bodies. He even warns the king about the evil plan of the tantrik.

Finally, when we are comparing them, we have to keep in mind that the Vetala is far more ancient than the Dracula. If we try to extract the points of exact similarities, it will not be possible. The vampire legends have modified and changed over time throughout the continents. So, some basic traits are there which we can relate to. Apart from that, other traits are local variables. Stoker has modified his Count according to his social structure and popularity of local legends. Because of these variables tracing a single origin source is not

possible. It is a question of which legend has influenced the others most. In that case, it can be said that the Vetala has dominantly influenced Stoker in his creation of Count Dracula.

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