

Studying the Penetration of Semitic Myths in Persian Poems

Vahideh N. Chegini^{1,*}

¹Editor of a scholarly research journal (Lesan Mobeen) of Qazvin International University, Iran

Dr. of Persian literature and language.

*Corresponding author.

Address: Qazvin International University, Qazvin, Iran.

Postal Box: 34145-1366

Email: vahideh_n.chegini@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Myth is like a mirror on spirit of mankind. Myth is the result of human's experiences in history. Myth has an old antecedent in Persian literature that we can see them in literary works.

In this article, we studied Persian and non-Persian myths and the reasons of penetration of Semitic and Greek myths in odes.

Key words: Persian myths; Semitic myths; Greek myths; Persian poem

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INTRODUCTION ABOUT MYTH AND PERSIAN MYTHS

Myth is narrator of a sacred and heavenly life story. Myth always is considered a real story because it always gives reference to reality. Since myth describes feats and great deeds of supernatural creatures and manifestation of heavenly forces, it is a model and an exemplary pattern of all the significant works and activities of human. The subject myth is among the eternal inner occupation of mankind which never leaves him alone and in his mind

induces such questions as meaning of death and life, human's fate, mystery of descent, hope for salvation, the desire to know one's original homeland and the longing for going back there and never finds a satisfactory answer for them.

Myths in the world have the same origin. "In interpretation of each nation's myths and tales and in comparison of myths and tales of different nations, focus on the respective cultural system which altogether form a single set and an interconnected whole is imperative." (Eliade, 1983, p.210-11) It is true that part of myths of ancient Iran, India and even Greece and Rome have a distinct origin but the course of mythicization in all primitives people and in different nation, if not identical, is not separate from one another. All nations in the course of their life have made some myths and fables which more or less were believed by them. In fact, myths may be derived historical facts or from mythical figures. According to Professor Bahar, "myth formation has been based on reflection of social structures, natural phenomena and psychological reactions of human." (Bahar, 2007, p.258)

These myths in the course of history may lose color, but they are always alive. One way to keep these myths alive is their entry to literary texts. It is the poet or writer who by profiting from myth's basis recreates the past culture. According to one of the mythologists, "myth is the early and spiritual history of a society and from this perspective it is quite comparable with language of that society. Language and myth which have a common function and are within monopoly of literary texts, recount for us the facts related to remote histories". (Greemal, 1994, p.19)

Iranian myths have been passed to us based on the same principles. Different poets have used them in various ways and have talked about national heroes, different feats and customs as well as holy and mythical plants and animals. However, in the course of time, Semitic myths

have entered the literary texts and little by little occupied the place of national myths and in some cases they have been mixed with each other. In this article, we investigate reasons for penetration of non-Iranian and particularly Semitic myths.

1. POSITION OF IRANIAN MYTHS IN LITERARY WORKS

First of all, it should be said that Iranian poets were not ignorant about their national myths and history and aware or unaware they have profited from these myths. For example, amongst the most prominent mythical birds in Iran, Simorq² myth can be referred to. History of presence of this mythical bird in Iranian culture reaches the times before Islam. Simorq "is a complicated and vague phenomenon and is a crystallization of contradictory perceptions and imaginations of Iranian folks". (Mokhtari, 2000, p.68) According to Ferdowsi³, Simorq lives on the mountain Alborz⁴. Other poets too, following Firdausi, consider place of Simorq on the mountain Alborz and refer to it by different titles.

Horse is another mythical animal in Iran. In Iranian myths, horse has a high position and like lion is the symbol of the sun and in Zoroastrian⁵ myths, is among the god creatures and its name is the same name used by Arians⁶ thousands years ago. Horse is one of the symbolic animals which in epical works especially in Shahnameh⁷ it has a fundamental value and in myths of other nations it has a symbolic value as well. "Horse's cultural emblems even have given identity to graves of ancient Iranians and have made them recognizable. When archeologists find a trace of horse from a grave, they immediately know that owner of the grave must be an Iranian or someone in connection with Iranian culture." (Rajabi, 2001, p.419) Iranian poets in Persian verses, after praise of kings, went after their horses and dedicated plenty of couplets in praise of their horses' qualities.

"I wonder about your horse,
Because of his running that the battlefield was blacken.
He has four qualities:
War, running, hurry and parade.
His hoof is like an anvil in running,
Does an anvil work wind?"
(Moezzi, 1983, p.39)

Other Iranian myths are the myths about plants. In Zoroastrian myths, plant is the fourth material creature in creation of the world and according to Bondahesh⁸'s account, "the first plant grew in the middle of the earth with several feet height and without branches, without skin, without thorn, wet and sweet. This plant possessed all kinds of vegetal power in its essence and water and fire found life with aid of plant." (Dadegi, 1999, p.40) One of the Persian poets said:

"Zoroastrian said in Avesta⁹ and Zand¹⁰
The origin of mankind is plant."
(Bahar, 1989, p.600)

Growth of plant in the spring and its depression in the winter is considered origin of plant-gods in mind of the early mankind and Adonis, Tammuz, Ishtar, Baal, Osiris and Siavash¹¹ are amongst such plant-deities. In folkloric fables, life of a person is sometimes so linked to tree that welter and decay of tree is associated with death.

In addition to rituals and other bestial and vegetal myths, there are also human myths in Iran which are referred to in Avesta and Pahlavi books and after them in Shahnameh and each one has mythical qualities. Historical and social changes especially penetration of religion and dominance of various governments in the course of history has had great impact on poets' view to myths. The first Iranian poets considered a lofty position for the national heroes. However, after lapse some time and coming of different government to power in Iran, Semitic myths prevailed and poets' attention became focused on them to the extent that after several centuries, they derided Iranian myths and considered them a bunch of lies and nonsense until one century ago when some nationalist and patriot poets were found who enlivened Iranian myths next to which they made some indications to Semitic myths. In the following, we state reasons for penetration of Semitic myth into literary works of Iran.

2. THE REASONS OF PENETRATION OF NON-IRANIAN MYTHS IN LITERARY WORKS

With lapse of time and cultural exchanges with neighboring nations, some changes were brought to Iranian myths and sometimes fundamental changes have

²Simorq: The name of mythical bird in Iran

³Ferdowsi: the most famous poet in composing epic. Shahnameh is his book.

⁴Alborz: the name of mountain in Iran.

⁵Zoroastrian: the name of Persian prophet.

⁶Arians: the race of Iranian.

⁷Shahnameh: the book of Ferdowsi in Persian epics.

⁸Bondahesh: one of the old books in Iran.

⁹Avesta: the name of Zoroastrian book.

¹⁰Zand: the translation of Avesta.

¹¹Siavash: the name of Persian god of vegetation.

taken place in some of them. In the following, we explain reasons for penetration of non-Iranian myths in literary works of Iran:

1-2- Islam entry and expansion of religious beliefs: after entry of Islam to Iran, many Iranian myths lost their general attraction; particularly those were in contrast with Islamic beliefs. Expansion of religion brought about a kind of disrespect and disbelief in Iranian myths, although after dominance of Arabs over Iran, Shaoubieh¹² Movement appeared which tried to arouse Iranians' patriotism and to familiarize people with their ancient heritages, but all what we have from allegorical interpretations either on national myths or on religious stories are mostly the very mystic and Islamic interpretations. "Paraphrases and interpreters preferred to paraphrase and interpret religious stories and prophets' life stories which due to their religious sanctity and importance and their conformity both with disposition of people and nature of the time and in terms of instruction and communication of mystic concepts is was regarded a more effective and influential means. In addition to this, it provoked less suspicion and objection amongst Islamic scientists and jurists, because national myth of Iran, although were always interesting subject due to revival of the past honors and awakening national pride, in an Islamic environment and in view of religious experts were regarded some sort of blasphemy. Hence, virtual paraphrasing and interpretation of Iranian myths even as slight indications and through referring to mythical characters in mystic verse and prose in terms of vastness and diversity are never comparable with gloss and interpretation of prophets' stories." (Pour Namdarian, 1985, p.156-57)

2-2- Holiness of Semitic myths in the eyes of Iranian: among Semitic people, the chosen individuals are known as prophets who are in relation with God and guide people and each one is of exceptional qualities in coping with problems. Unlike Semitic folks, the select Iranian figures are represented as kings with throne and crown. It is for this reason that Semitic prophets, as are represented in poets' works, are regarded more valuable relative to Iranian kings.

Salomon the prophet who today has become one of the important religious and cultural Iranian characters, has entered our culture and has led to link between the three great religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam as well as between Semitic and Arian nations. In literature, story of Solomon, Hoopoe, Solomon's ring and even his vizier, Asef Barkhia, have been many times referred to.

3-2- Turks and Mongols Entry to Iran: from second half of the fifth century (AH), particularly from the early sixth century (AH), signs of weakness appeared in national epical works in verse and from this period

onwards versification of the old national stories was abandoned. Even ode composers were not interested in their national sources of pride. Turk kings were very zealous about Islam and strongly suppressed opposition. They many time made campaign to India and on pretext of fighting profanity looted this land. Due to this religious bigotry and blind obedience, they imported many superstitions to religious commandments and according to Dr. Safa (1973, p.155), these bigotries were the most dangerous souvenir brought by Turk vassals to Iranians.

Poets of this period for the sake of grandiloquence in praise of Turk kings and receiving reward from them were ready to sacrifice Iranian national heroes for their personal interests and regard them meaner than their praised ones. However, thank God "despite of large extent dominance of Turk race during several centuries over Persian language and literature, traces of Turkish myths is absolutely not seen in Persian literature". (Shafiee Kadkani, 2003, p.242)

4-2- Weakness of nation fundamentals and racial prides oblivion: the farther we move from the fourth century, we observe that nation fundamentals get weaker. It is true that poets of the fifth centuries have named a lot of Iranian myths and directly or indirectly have referred to Iranian customs and feasts, but due to influence of Turks and their disaffection to Iran's past, patriotic morale of poets declined to the extent that they in place of being proud of their own past, they took pride in Turk and Mongol kings.

5-2- Invitation to panegyrics: most of odes of ode composing poets are composed in praise of kings. Kings, in all periods, advertised for panegyrics, since they were eager for their fame and survival. Hence, poets who were after fame and money found way into their court and were given the opportunity to read out their lodes in praise of kings. Given such circumstances, then there would be no room for Iranian myths, since kings considered themselves higher than mythical heroes and the poets confirmed this.

6-2- Entry of Mysticism into poem: cult of Sufism since the first century (AH) have been existed, but the thriving time for this cult in Iran starts from second half of the fifth century (AH). In the fifth and sixth century, mystics were adherents to abstract mysticism. This cult, given its special care for education of mystics and guidance of general public, profited from Persian verse prose as a means for expressing their educational and mystical purposes. Presence of these contents in prose and poem freed poem from kings' court and Sufi poets composed rich with this content and introduces a particular mindset to Persian literature. Mystic poets used national myths to communicate their advices, but for giving sanctity to their works, they employed stories of Semitic prophets and made use of many stories of prophets as the source of their inspiration. "Spiritual

¹²Shaoubieh: the name of a movement that tried to restore Persian epics.

paraphrase and interpretation of Iranian myths, even as partial indications and reference to great characters, in mystical poem and prose what concerns extent and diversity is never comparable with paraphrases and interpretations of propjets' stories." (Pour Namdarian, 1985, p.157)

7-2-Lack of resistance against alien myths and their mixture with Iranian myths: One of the most important reasons for penetration of non-Iranian myths was inability of Iranian in the face of aliens. By emergence of Islam, Semitic myths were blended with Iranian myths. Mythical time, place and personality of the two Iranian and Semitic systems were mixed. Iranian kings and celebrities were linked to Jewish prophets and kings. Zarathustra was mixed with Abraham and Jeremiah, Jamshid¹³ with Solomon became one. For example, in the following phrase Nimrud was identified with Keykavous¹⁴: "since from among sons of Sam, the boy of Noah, both Arabs and non-Arabs, there was no one to become king, a king from non-Arabs stood up the name of who was Nimrud from Iranian origin who was called Keykavous." (Ardalan Javan, 1988, p.161)

Or in the following couplets, Jam and Solomon were thought as one:

"The king is sitting down and the king of India with him,
Similar to Belqeys side Jamshid."
(Farrokhi, 1976, p.226)

As was explained above, history and myths are linked to each other. They are a kind of historical accounts the image of which is clearly seen in history of nations, but by lapse of time this historical image little by little is radically changed and in minds of people wholly changes of color. In other words, a historical subject which once upon a time was an objective truth extremely mixes with religious myths and stories, and national and supernatural myths and at the same time it can have a historical aspect. For instance, Alexander the Macedonian has an absolutely historical aspect. He attacked Iran, burned the Persepolis and did many other atrocities, but in the course of time and after Islam, he has turned into savant, erudite and justice dispensing person who together with prophet Khezr¹⁵ goes after water of life and here in fact, history is transformed into myth.

Transmutation of Alexander's face had two reasons: first, according to Dr. Safavi (1985, p.31), Alexander's soldiers who were specially attached to him, after his death felt regret for not worshipping him as he desired. Hence, they praised him as much as they could and spread

exaggerating news about his conquests. Second, since Iranian could not accept ruling of foreign, they have tried to introduce him an Iranian and descendent of Dara¹⁶ and inheritor of Achaemenides¹⁷ throne and crown. In fact, "it was the only way to protect the national pride" (Safavi, 1985, p.39). Accordingly, some historians have regarded Alexander an Iranian. Poets as well consider him an Iranian hero and think of the praised one higher than him.

8-2- Fame of scientific and philosophical figures in the Age of Poets: many poets in their works have mentioned names of Plato, Hermes, and Aristotle and have compared the praised ones with them. However, in this regard, no mixture took place and poets only sufficed with mentioning their names.

9-2- Desire of poets to apply a variety of fantasized images: Iranian poets are very interested in snobbery and revealing their skill in verse especially in ode composition. For this reason, they have tried to make use of different stories in order to show off their knowledge to other poets and the praised ones. This led to increasing prevalence of Semitic and Hellenic myths in Persian literature. They even entered many personages of love stories of Arab poets in their lodes and gave them a mythical aspect.

As a result of these causes we see that poets knowingly or unknowingly, given such factors as dominance of vassals and tribes of yellow race over Iran and influence of religious factors and oblivion of racial pride sources and weakness of nationality fundamentals among Iranians which are incompatible with preservation, development and organization of national epics, have contributed to prevalence of non-Iranian myths and have paved the way for their penetration and mixture with Iranian myths so that many of historians rely on their citations and base various Iranian, Hellenic and Semitic stories on their statements.

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¹³Jamshid: the name of Persian king.

¹⁴Keykavous: the name of Persian king.

¹⁵Khezr: the name of prophet.

¹⁶Dara: the name of Persian king.

¹⁷Achaemenides: the name of first Persian dynasty.

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