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The Semantic Presence of Myth in Contemporary Algerian Poetry: An Analysis of Selected Examples

Dr. Aissa Chennafi

University Mohamed Boudiaf- M'Sila, Algeria, aissa.chennafi@univ-msila.dz

Dr. Abdelkader Benameur

University of Ghardaia, Algeria, abdelkader.benameur@univ-ghardaia.dz

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Abstract:

Through this study, the researcher aims to highlight the semantic presence of myth in contemporary Algerian poetry and the accompanying artistic and creative use made of it by poets to express their personal experiences and poetic vision, The author traces the connection between contemporary Algerian poets and the myths of their ancestors, and how they utilise these myths as a significant source for colouring their poetic imagery and endowing it with a meaningful relationship to contemporary philosophical, spiritual and personal themes.

Keywords: Myth; Contemporary Algerian Poetry; Semantic Presence; Poetic Imagery; Literary Criticism; Mythical Symbolism.

Introduction:

Myth, in general, is 'the art of primitive man—a blend of magic, religion, history, contemplation and science—formulated in a fantastical style in which events appear as if they were childhood dreams in mythical ages...It evokes the dream when it blends with truth and with imagination, enriching the reality of life with all that envelops and encompasses it; it transports us to the illogical, the irrational and the non-spatial. It is the oldest source through which humankind has contemplated the mystery of its existence amidst the awe-inspiring phenomena of the universe"¹.

The spiritual allure of myth and its profound power to influence have prompted writers and poets to employ it in their works and to reweave it into new forms, utilising its content to



imbue their literary texts with its magic and symbolic significance, thereby creating new meanings.²

What has also prompted contemporary writers and poets to turn to myth is the reality we experience in today's world: a reality shrouded in contradiction, pervaded by ruin, and governed by a civilisation fenced in by systems and laws that restrict human freedom and shackle our yearning to live simply and feel secure in a world dominated by materialism, where alienation has deepened a sense of alienation, where human relationships imbued with emotion have been lost, anxiety has become the essence of feeling, and restlessness disturbs the peace of mind³.

Hence, the contemporary writer has sought a world that enables him to return 'to something of his original nature, in which he can reconcile the primitive embodiment of his contemplation with the modern human's aspiration to recreate his world. He found no alternative but to return to the original source, to myth: to emulate it, breathe in its magic, draw inspiration from it, utilise it, and rebuild the world he seeks through the words of its rituals'⁴.

Inspiration drawn from myth, with its creative content, serves to enrich the literary text and infuse it with new life; for the use of myth in its magical form harmonises and merges with what lives in the mind of the inspired poet, offering him alternatives and new approaches that respond to his sensibilities and are capable of artistically expressing what is on his mind⁵. To ensure the successful harnessing of the myth's semantic energy and its optimal utilisation as a structural element in the poetic text, two fundamental conditions must be met:

- The poem must require it, so that it becomes a showcase for the breadth of culture.
- The ability to portray its role in depth, and to transform it into a structural element that blends seamlessly into the fabric of the experience⁶

Definition of myth:

The Greek word for myth is MYTHOS, and in English it is MYTH... Thus, the meaning in both languages is 'that which is spoken'... Here we note the similarity between these two words and the word 'MOUTH', which means the mouth... The meaning of myth, then, is the spoken word⁷, a discourse accompanying worship and religious rituals; it is an affirmation of the verbal aspect of the act of worship before it itself becomes a narrative about the rituals or stems from them⁸.

Scholars have divided myths into ritual-doctrinal myths, which are considered the verbal translation of pagan rituals, and explanatory myths, which attempt to interpret the cosmic

phenomena surrounding and preceding them, attributing them to unseen forces in a narrative that links idea and action and embodies phenomena as living beings that influence and are influenced by others, Then there is the symbolic myth, in which the myth becomes an embodied symbol and strips the gods or mythical heroes of their human attributes; and we also find the historical myth, in which heroes, by virtue of their abilities or the tools at their disposal, rise to the rank of those with supernatural powers⁹.

Myth and Poetry:

Poetry has been influenced in its internal fabric and overall structure by myths; primitive peoples imbued their myths with poetic imagery and a descriptive mode of expression¹⁰, and the aesthetic perception of myth is its most significant aspect; the influence on our contemporary poetry stems from that broad perspective which discerns its dimensions, listens to its events, absorbs its finest details, and emulates its style and modes of depiction... And all the verbal works that humanity has sought to immortalise represent the pinnacle of artistic expression; Greek myths and the literary works inspired by them all belong to the highest order of eloquence, and for this reason, the characteristics of the artistic composition of myths, and their approach to imagery and form, are what most capture the attention of the contemporary poet, drawing him into a world teeming with poetry¹¹. All these characteristics in myths—from the ability to personify and imbue the phenomena of nature and life with inner life and human form, this penetrating, innate language and the evocative imagery capable of encompassing and revealing; and this unbridled capacity of the human imagination to explore the world of natural phenomena and the human psyche is what links the contemporary poet to the myths of antiquity¹².

The Semantic Manifestations of Myth in Contemporary Algerian Poetry:

1- The mystical and national dimensions of myth in the poetry of Kadour Rahmani:

Among the contemporary Algerian poets who have sought to incorporate mythology into their poetry, to capture artistic meanings and expressions, and to link these to Sufi heritage whilst remaining committed to national causes, we find the poet **Qaddour Rahmani**, who drew upon the myth of '**The Phoenix**', an ancient Greek name for 'a bird that lived for **500** years in the Arabian wilderness, and when the time of its death came, it would set itself alight and its body would turn to ashes; from these ashes another phoenix would emerge, living for the same duration, and thus life and rebirth would continue. This bird may appear in ancient myths under different names: in Egyptian mythology it is 'Beno', and in Indian mythology it is the '¹³'."

Perhaps he sought in it the most profound and meaningful image to express two fundamental themes that occupied a significant portion of his work: love and violence. He

drew upon the evocative power of this ' ' myth, particularly in two thematically distinct poems: the first, 'Divisions on Fire and the Spring', and the second, 'Because You Alone Are My Beloved'.

What invites reflection on the creative ability of the poet (Qadour Rahmani) is the manner in which this myth is employed in these two poems, and the technique by which they are approached and aligned with the poem's central theme; he utilised it in two contrasting ways: positive and negative, or affirmative and negative.

A. The negative (rejected) aspect:

In the poem 'Stanzas on Fire and the Spring', the theme of which revolves around the 'Black Decade' or the 'Years of Embers' that Algeria endured in the 1990s, the poet Qaddour Rahmani was a first-hand witness to the horrific devastation and destruction suffered by his homeland during that period. He described those events in the following lines:

*Where do I come from?
Your rains have stripped
Your trees have been uprooted
How your trees have been uprooted, my country
You have sunk into the mire of your own hopes
For my country is no mere passing phase
It was not hurled by a reckless breath or a volcano
It is not
a slender, graceful figure with drooping eyelids
It is not a mythical bird
that built a nest of sand in a tower of smoke¹⁴
Her slender figure was not meant
to
to dance in the Sultan's palace
Do not let the moons of her femininity remain
grapes to be pressed one day in the darkness for the pirate*

The poet has employed the myth of the phoenix for its symbolic significance, linking the theme of this myth to the description of the gravity of what the homeland has endured; thus, the point of intersection between the themes of the poem and the myth is 'fire and rebirth'. However, the poet has used it in a negative sense; that is to say, what befell that bird is not the same fate that the homeland will face. The homeland will not be utterly destroyed and then rise again; this is a magnificent artistic image woven by the poet to emphasise that the homeland will remain standing and proud, and will not be destroyed by the machinations of enemies and the spiteful.

B. The Affirmative (Positive):

As for the poem in which the poet (Qadour Rahmani) establishes the similarity and semantic correspondence between the content of the myth of the 'Phoenix'—in which annihilation is a path to resurrection and life in the Sufi experience—and the state of the lover's annihilation in his beloved, he says in the poem 'For You Alone Are My Beloved':

*You are the only one who¹⁵
whom He named
embroidered the robe of my heart
my beloved
intersect upon your brow
The ashes of my extinguished flame
For from it comes my presence
And from it my absence
And from it, the thronging of veins
Intertwined
Then they become one
until they transform
Like the tapestry of the heavens*

'Presence' is 'a special state of awareness that occurs in the heart of the servant regarding a specific matter, so that he is fully present with it; in this state, one is presumed to be absent from all else apart from this matter, for presence is the opposite of heedlessness'¹⁶, Presence is the detachment of the hearts of the knowers from all the distractions that occupy them; it is an awareness that occurs in the heart and manifests its effect on the senses, such as

hearing, which is present only when the heart is present¹⁷. Hence, the poet (**Qadour Rahmani**) drew a parallel between the Sufi experience of presence in the Divine Presence and the annihilation and resurrection of the phoenix, for there is no resurrection or life for the phoenix except after annihilation, likewise, Sufi presence is only achieved through annihilation in relation to the sensory world and detachment from it through seclusion, 'which produces the idea, and the idea produces presence'¹⁸, so that one may be resurrected and experience the delight of salvation and divine presence; for presence is the presence of the heart with the Truth whilst it is absent from creation"¹⁹, and absence from the world of creation is birth and presence with the Creator, which is one and the same thing

that happens to the lover who, in the presence of the Beloved, is cut off from the external world, is absorbed into it, and is reborn to live in his own world; for his senses neither see, nor hear, nor smell anything but the scent of the Beloved.

2- The philosophical dimension of the myth in the poetry of 'Ammar ibn al-Qurayshi:

Among the philosophical and intellectual uses of myth, and the extraction of meanings and connotations from it, we also find the poet **Ammar bin Laqrishi**, who chose as the title of his poem '**And Sisyphus Refuses?**' to affirm and highlight the myth of **Sisyphus** and its philosophical and semantic depth throughout his poem. The myth of **Sisyphus** refers to the mythical Greek figure **Sisyphus**, who was condemned by the gods to push a huge boulder to the summit of a mountain, but whenever the boulder nears the summit, it rolls back down again, forcing him to repeat this task endlessly. The figure of **Sisyphus** represents the human being who realises the futility of his life and the universe, yet does not succumb to despair or resignation, but instead chooses to continue striving and struggling without end. In his profound philosophical essay ***The Myth of Sisyphus***, **Albert Camus** set out his conception of '**absurdity**'—the constant struggle between man's deep desire to find meaning in his life and the indifference and existential silence that surround him.

And in this regard, the poet says:²⁰

Cover me with a sheet; my time has passed

Cover me with the night; my day is gone

Cover me with thorns, for my sky has faded

I sought to draw the secret from the recesses of my soul

But it turned to dust...

I wanted to smile at my reflection in the mirror of what is to come

But it shattered...

Let the rock crumble upon my head... upon my heart...

Take my place; the game of diving is my torment

Take my life... the revolution of silence is my life...

The revolution of rejection is my life...

Take my heart—my heart is a fortress of despair...

Take all I possess: my sighs, my tears and my shroud...

In these lines of poetry, the poet confides in us his emotions and inner turmoil, the pain and anxiety that assail him, and his attempt to understand what is happening around him. Sorrow besieges him and despair is on the verge of overcoming him; he likens himself to **Sisyphus's** boulder, which he has resigned himself to bearing upon his heart.

Then he regains his composure and comes to terms with it

How merciful is the boulder!²¹

Sisyphus, O rejector of misery

How wretched it is to live with blind lightning...

How wretched it is to live with deafening thunder...

How sad it is when the rain falls and you do not bloom!?

I fell in love with a daffodil, and so did all men

The narcissus withered and died... whilst the men flourished...

I cast my very self into the lake of suffering, and the fools painted pictures of chirping birds...

I burned myself... and the chirping rose...

I journeyed into madness, sipping the balm of salvation from its cup

So the madmen hastened their journey towards it...

The cup shattered... the bud of madness in my veins...

And the madmen were cured...!?

Bleed, O Saeed, the earth...

Take my darkness and wear it...

Take my greyness and savour it...

Take my madness and follow it...

How merciful is the rock...!?

The poet reveals the cause of his pain and suffering at the hands of those who lie in wait and harbour malice, who seek to rob him of the love of his life and strive to win his beloved for themselves, and despite his flight and attempts to distance himself, they continue to watch him. The poet, therefore, remains patient and determined to hold on to his beloved, even if it costs him the fate of Sisyphus; for he sees her as more merciful, and he remains faithful to his love, whatever the cost.

3- The significance of love and sacrifice in the myth as portrayed by the poet Othman Lousif:

The themes of love and sacrifice are among the most important subjects that permeate contemporary Algerian poetry; they are noble values through which the poet expresses his loyalty and devotion to his beloved. The poet **Othman Lousif** has chosen the myth of **Prometheus** to evoke these themes in his poetry, The myth of **Prometheus** tells the story of the titan who fought alongside the Olympian gods against the Titans; he is known as the creator of humankind, their protector, and the one who stole fire from the gods to bestow it upon them. In this context, the poet says:

What glory has sprung from you²²

and granted you this awe-inspiring majesty

And how did you cross the deserts and surmount the perils

Until you found your way to me

And built your lapis lazuli temple between my ribs

and cast a spell upon the Magi

And the spirit of Prometheus was seduced

You are the purity of the heavens

Ah, let me purify my heart in you

of poison, sickness and darkness
Let me drink the divine nectar
from your radiant blue light
Then grant me your wings
So that I may soar into the distant kingdom
And linger on the terraces of twilight
I shall set fire to fire
And the wound to the wound
And with blood and fire
The ascension of all mankind

In this poem, the poet draws upon the myth of **Prometheus**, which symbolises salvation and redemption for the sake of salvation; for the poet, love is resistance and sacrifice, and for the sake of his beloved, he embarks on an adventure and steals the fire that burns him yet revives his beloved.

Conclusion:

Through this study of the semantic presence of myth in contemporary Algerian poetry, it has become clear to us that contemporary poets have drawn upon ancient human heritage to enrich the content of poetic texts and deepen their meanings, thus embodying its aesthetic and artistic role and transforming it into a structural element that blends with and expresses their poetic experience, whilst engaging the reader in the interpretation of meanings. We have documented this utilisation, which presents that philosophical vision and expresses through it the mystical spiritual dimension and human emotions.

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Footnotes :

¹ . Abd al-Ridha Ali: *Myth in al-Sayyab's Poetry*, Ministry of Culture and Arts Publications, Iraq, 1987, p. 17.

² See Ahmad Daoud Abdul-Khalifa: *Myth in Modern Jordanian Poetry*, p. 44.

³ . See, Abd al-Ridha Ali: *Myth in al-Sayyab's Poetry*, p. 19.

⁴ . Ibid., pp. 19, 20.

⁵ . See the same source, p. 22.

⁶ . Othman Maqirsh: 'Poetic Discourse in the Collection *The Rose Said* by Othman al-Lusayf', Press Foundation for Publishing, Distribution and Communication, M'sila, Algeria, 2011, p. 155.

⁷ . Farouk Khorshid: *The Arab Myth-Writer: The Roots of Thought and the Originality of Creativity*, Dar 'Alam al-Ma'rifah, Kuwait, 1978, p. 24.

⁸ . Ibid., p. 24.

⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰ See Anas Daoud: **Myth in Modern Arabic Poetry**, Dar al-Jil for Printing, Egypt, n.d., p. 22.

¹¹ See the previous reference, p. 41.

¹² Ibid., p. 41.

¹³ . Abdelkader Abu Sharifa and Hussein Lafi Qazq: *An Introduction to the Analysis of Literary Texts*, Dar al-Fikr, 4th ed., Jordan, 2008, p. 66.

¹⁴ . Qaddour Rahmani: *The Wealth of My Life*, Dar Artistic, Algiers, 2007, p. 72.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁶ . Su'ad al-Hakim: **The Sufi Lexicon: Wisdom within the Limits of the Word**, Maktabat al-Jana'in, Lebanon, 1981, p. 327.

¹⁷ See the previous reference, p. 327.

¹⁸ . Ibid., p. 327.

¹⁹ . Ibid., p. 327.

²⁰ . Ammar bin Laqrishi: **The Station of Exile**, Dar al-Rawa'i', 1st ed., Algiers, 2014, p. 23.

²¹ . Ibid., p. 24.

²² . Othman Lousif: **The Rose Spoke**, Dar Houma, Algiers, 2000, pp. 71–72.