

A Comparative Study of Water Semiology in Sohrab Sepehri's and Gibran Kahlil Gibran's Works

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Doi:10.7575/aiac.all.v.5n.5p.88

Received: 22/06/2014

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.5n.5p.88>

Accepted: 19/08/2014

Abstract

All over the world, among various cultures, water has always been a major concept and given a lot of attention. Many nations in different ways have delivered it in different symbolic forms. The implications given to water are based on cultural and national tendencies. Being highly important, water and its semiology has beckoned prominent poets and authors' attention and because of its great function it has been utilized in conveying those poets' intentions thereby enriching their works. In the current study, we look into the importance of water and its symbolic representation in Sohrab Sepehri's and Gibran Kahlil Gibran's works. The results show that Sohrab has used the symbolic aspects of water more than Gibran has. Sohrab's symbolism is rooted in Persian-Islamic mythology, both national and religious, thus mainly oriental in origin. On the other hand, Gibran has been influenced by the western and universal symbols of water.

Keywords: Arabic, Gibran Kahlil Gibran, Persian, Poetry, Sohrab Sepehri, Symbol, Water.

1. Introduction

Symbols and myths have always had a significant role in the potency and development of human civilizations, nations, cultures, and literatures. Such influential role is remarkable in both the poetry and prose of different nations. Taking into account time and place, different poets and authors around the world have had in one way or the other their say in and mark on symbols and myths.

Persians and Arabs have had similar social and political conditions in the life times of Sohrab Sepehri and Gibran Khalil Gibran, consequently Persian and Arab poets have dealt with similar and sometimes identical subjects and themes. On the other hand, both group of poets have been considerably influenced by western schools. Such schools as symbolism, romanticism, realism among many others have brought into being their creations. Meanwhile, Sohrab and Gibran have both been influenced by symbolism and romanticism. Both figures display a pronounced tendency to nature and naturalism in their artistic and literary observations and ideas. This trend has gained a symbolic color and nature. This common propensity between Sohrab and Gibran is the main ground for the current comparative study. Although many authors have dealt with Sohrab and Gibran either independently or by way of comparison, none have conducted a comparative study on the semiology of water in these two authors.

2. Waster Symbolism in Different Cultures and Religions

In the Holy Quran one reads,

“And We have created every living thing from water” [Prophets: 30]

Water is an element with many symbolic functions, namely, purity, subtlety, immortality, fertility..., and it has served myth and epic down through history, and meanwhile has evolved in its functions. This functional evolution stems from one enduring principle. Mythological symbols serve religious purposes and impart the speaker's and listener's belief and faith in the absolute sanctity of the mythological-symbolic truths involved, however when these symbols pass beyond myths and enter the epic phase they lose their faith aspect for the speaker/listener and become secular entities. (Mohammadi, 2010: 7) Water as a myth and one of the four contradictory-elemental constituent parts of the material world in the mythological phase acts upon the principle of essential contradiction and eventual unity among elements thus acquiring general/universal mythological functions. The symbolic-mythological functions of water are threefold:

1. Through all human cultures water has been the primary source of material creation which drives life cycle in the cosmic structure. This elemental function is portrayed in the double process of creation and destruction through water.
2. Water is the symbol of immortality and material persistence. This myth is found in 'life water' and 'healing water' symbols.
3. The third mythological function of water is the rite of passage through water, washing and baptism through water, as a test of passage from a material phase toward spiritual purity, passage from the old to the new as the archetype of death-rebirth. (Ghaemi, 2009:47)

Here, one can refer to the story of Moses as he floated over the Nile to be reborn into a new life in the Pharaoh's court or as he fled Pharaoh through a body of water in the Exodus.

Due to the vital role of water in the fertility of nature, a major part of myths has been allotted to this very essential natural element. Water and rain-bearing clouds have sometimes been likened to a woman's face, as in Persian myths, because a woman has always been considered the symbol fertility, life, and perpetuity, whereas the cow is the face that is used in Indian myths. The dragon, the symbol of drought, attempts to trap them and stop freshness and liveliness. It is a hero that is destined to defeat the dragon and set free the entrapped cow and woman in order to restore fertility and vegetation. This symbolic significance of women and cows is found in such stories as that of the Persian Zahak, Esfandiyar, Goshtasp, and the Indian Indira and Ramayana. The deep structure to all these myths is fertility and it is dependent on the functional role of water. (Rezaei Dasht Arzhane, 2009: 111)

Moreover, water is one the four basic elements of nature. It has always been sacred to Persians who have given it the position of a deity. From time immemorial, the Persians have followed the lead of ancient Sumerians in considering water a vital, creative force in the universe. Thus water has been posed as a sacred and vital natural element in Avesta, the sacred Scriptures of the Zoroastrian religion. Abanyasht and Tiryasht, two chapters of Avesta, have dealt with the role and significance of water. Anahita or Nahid, meaning the pure and chaste, has been praised as the grand- or arch-goddess of water and fertility. (Yahaghi, 2007: 12)

As mentioned, in most cultures water is the symbol of birth and fertility. However, according to Greek historians, it is Persians who have focused on this role for water, for these historians say that Persians do not urinate in water, do not spit in it, and do not wash their hands therein, of course what they mean is running water which should be protected against any impurity. Persians had the habit of offering sacrifices to water. It has been reported that about 100 BC the Persians while offering a sacrifice to the angel or deity of water would place themselves beside a river, spring, or shoreline and would dig a pit next to water and then perform the sacrifice rite, so that blood would not stain or contaminate water. This rite went on well until 500 and 600 AD. (ibid: 3)

The sanctity of and the regard for water is not limited to a few cultures around the world, but is noticeable in almost all human cultures and civilizations. For instance, among the ancient civilizations of Latin America, the Incas, like many other world cultures, worshiped the sun, but they would first perform ablutions in a holy water and then perform their prayers to the sun. (IRIB4, 2012)

Apart from this, water has assumed different symbolic figures and representations across various cultures. For instance, among Hindus, water is the creator of Lakshmi, the virgin water lily. In this culture Agni is born from water and the earth is the creator of all the universe. Varuna controls waters. Vishnu rests on water snakes: scientists have revealed interesting facts about the relationship between snakes and water. A water lily springs off Vishnu's navel on which Brahma sits. (Cooper, 2000: 3)

In Islamic culture water means mercy, inner knowledge, purity, and life. Water in the form of rain or a spring means divine revelation and truth. Water means creation. (ibid: 2) In the Quranic Surah of Hud we read that God's throne is built on water; therefore, water is held in such high esteem.

"... His Throne was resting on the water ..." [Hud: 7]

Also, in ancient Persian beliefs, water is the source of earth and it is only after water appears that life begins and is the basis of all creation as witnessed in the cited Surah. In Mesopotamian myths, the first ocean is the offspring of the sky, man, and earth. In the Holy Quran one reads:

Have not the unbelievers ever considered that the skies and the earth were once one mass, then We split them asunder? And We have created every living thing from water. Will they still not believe? [The Prophets: 30]

In Islamic culture, water is also the symbol of science and knowledge. In a religious interpretation one can say that the above ayah or verse reflects that water stands for, that divine knowledge offered in the Holy Quran, through which Allah bestows life on everything thus giving them eternal life and light.

After the advent of the myths of genesis or creation, in most instances, water, woman, and fertility have been merged. In very ancient writing and scripture, too, the word water is considered feminine in gender. (Sheikfarshi, 2003: 41) In other cultures, too, water has both served several practical functions in peoples' lives and delivered different symbolic representation for them, but this catalogue exceeds the scope of our current work.

3. Mythology in Contemporary Persian Literature

Although this article studies symbols, a brief look at and a comparison of the ancient functions of archetypes and the symbolic role of natural and supernatural elements in old and contemporary authors, Iranian or non-Iranian, reveals that

most of these symbols are rooted in myth. Any semiological study of poets similar to Sohrab requires due attention to the subject of mythology.

In the case of Persian literature, mythology and symbolism are mostly revealed in poetry. Old and contemporary Persian poets have masterfully reproduced myths and symbols in their works. Such an enduring master of poetry as Ferdowsi has revived the majority of Persian myths in his *Shahnameh*. Among contemporary Persian poets such figures as Nima Yushij, Ahmad Shamlu, Sohrab Sepehri, and others have dealt with national myths in their own characteristic manners. The poetic integration and incorporation of Persian myths has dual roots on one hand in such old Persian epics as Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, Nizami's *Eskandar Nameh* or the *Book of Alexander*, Assadi Tousi's *Garshasp Nameh*, or Daghighi Tousi's *Goshtasp Nameh*, or in the contemporary poems of the Mashroote or Constitution Period on the other hand. Banou Karimi remarks, "In contemporary Persian poetry, Nima Yushij is the pioneer of such poetry. Apart from Nima, other poets such as Sohrab Sepehri, Siavash Kasraei, Ahmad Shamlu, Mehdi Akhavan Sales, and Mohammad Reza Shafiei Kadkani have composed poems with symbolic and mythological elements and themes." (2009: 171-191)

The literary recreation and most importantly the poetic reincarnation of myths is among the most beautiful and artistic applications of mythology. One of the approaches, through which one can thoroughly study and analyze the subject of recreated myths and the socio-politico-cultural tendencies of the poets and authors involved, is the comparative approach. In this approach, one should cite examples of the symbolic recreation of myths in the poems of leading contemporary Persian poets and then compare them with analogous samples in the works of poets in world literature in order to discover the common features of such mythologies and their applications in contemporary literature. Such studies had better make a better use and perform a closer inspection of the reasons behind the tendency among poets and authors toward the recreation of myths through the application of epic and mythic elements in their symbolisms.

Sohrab has used the words myth and myths seven times in his poems. For instance one may read:

"Two steps from the flower, / Beside the eternal fountain of earthly myths, you stay, / And a transparent fear possesses you." (Sepehri, 2010: 342)

Also in "Behind Seas", Sepehri says:

"Far, one should move far away, / That city's man had no myths, / That city's woman was not as plentiful as a cluster of grapes." (ibid: 346)

Or, in the following stanza he says:

"This body bereft of days and nights, / On the slant roof of figures, / Was sleeping like a myth, / My thoughts touched it through the breach of celibacy." (ibid: 420)

Myth and mythical concepts in Sohrab's poems are of great importance, and Sohrab has made a generous use of myths in his works. However, it is evident that Sohrab's naturalism has led him to rely more on natural symbols than to depend on epic and national myths and symbols. Sohrab has used Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* to refer in passing to the story of Sohrab, the son of Rostam. These lines are mentioned in his book of poetry called, "The Pilgrim":

"Hand over the wine, / You should haste, / I am coming back from a journey in an epic, / And, I am like water, / Of the whole story of Sohrab and the panacea, / Fluent." (ibid: 302)

Sohrab refers to archetypes, mythic motifs, natural elements, and mythical figures in his works. Among archetypes Sohrab refers to 'anima' or the feminine part of the male personality (according to Jungian psychology). The anima archetype is more evident in such poems as "Shasosa", "The Lost Moment", "The Resonance", "Close to the Far", "The Reapers of Dawn", "Night of Coordination", and "The Primeval Call", and the most important piece is "Always". Another archetype in Sohrab's poetry is 'utopia' used in such poems as "The Bird of Riddles", "Our Shade of Comfort is Us", "The Footfall of Water", "And a Message on the Way", "In Gulestaneh", "The Address", "An Oasis in the Moment", and "Beyond Seas".

Sohrab in "The Wet Lantern", "Confrontation", "Dark Fruit", "There was a Bird Here", and "The Pilgrim", refers to the Fall of Adam and Eve. Among the natural elements used in Sohrab's mythology one can refer to the frequent use of the plant 'rhubarb'. Sohrab follows Aryan and Persian myths and considers 'rhubarb' as the origin of the first human couple called Mashi and Mashyaneh. Such poems as "The Pilgrim", "To the Companion's Orchard", "There was a Bird Here", and "The Footfall of Water" have dealt with 'rhubarb'. Another plant favored and used by Sohrab is 'Water Lily' which is mentioned in such poems as "Water Lily", "The Mirror Flower", "The Footfall of Water", "The Pilgrim", and "The Passing" among many others. Most mythologists have considered 'water lily' as the symbol of Buddha. Sohrab has also made explicit use of such a mythological figure as Mithras, the Persian god of light and truth (protector against evil); Persian sun god, in such a poem as "The Invocation".

4. Mythology in Contemporary Arabic Literature

Generally speaking, myths are rooted in civilized lands with an ancient and rich national history. Tracing ancient myths in the Arab world is a demanding task, because pre-Islamic Arabs were mainly nomadic tribes. Sattari states, "One of the outcomes of wandering nomadic lifestyle, which also doubled the religious poverty of the primitive tribes, is the lack of myths and rituals in the folklore of the people of The Arabian Peninsula." (2010: 60)

On the other hand, Sattari further argues, "It is also wrong and incorrect to speak of and resort to myths when referring to such an intellectually bright and rich religion as Islam. Thus, one can conclude that myths can be traced back, but not

when one refers to the essence of Islam, only when one refers to the history and destiny of, the Holy Prophet, its founder, basically as narrated by religious biographers.” (ibid: 25)

However, Arab poets following their introduction to western literary schools were greatly influenced by myths and used them abundantly in their own poetics, hence creating a new chapter in contemporary Arabic literature, to such an extent that modern poetry is called the poetry of mythology. (Hamoud, 1996: 55)

By using myths Arab poets managed to move poetic forms beyond their familiar stereotypical structures and create novel and innovative forms which are boundless. They used myths to upgrade their limited personal contemporary experiences to the level of collective humane realities on a mythical, that is, imaginative scale. Of course, Arab poets have tended to use non-Arabic, mostly western, myths instead of drawing on local or oriental myths, and the are many reasons for this choice are manifold. As mentioned earlier the absence of native myths in most of the Arabian region and the greater familiarity of pioneer Arab poets with western myths are the main causes. What strikes one is that even those Arab poets who have been familiar with the oriental myths have acquired their knowledge through western poets. (Jidah, 1980: 21)

Among the most common myths in contemporary Arabic poetry, one can mention Oedipus, Sisyphus, Ishtar, Tammuz, Icarus, Orpheus, Gilgamesh, Prometheus, and Sinbad. The poets have focused on certain aspects and implications of these myths. For instance, when a poet wants to relate their inner turbulences and physical ailments they would use such mythological figures as Sinbad, Orpheus, Ulysses, and Icarus, when this same poet wants to deal with resurrection and renaissance, that is, rebirth or revival, they would refer to Adonis, Tammuz, Jesus, Osiris, or Lazarus. (Abbas, 2001: 129)

Mircea Eliade speaks of the importance of Greek myths saying that the cultural significance of these myths is that they reveal the position and status of man in the west, and they would prepare us to better understand the meaning of tragedy, philosophy, and even Christianity, through theoretical speculations about the position of man as an epitome. (1993: 45) Contemplating this statement by Eliade one comes to think that probably Arab poets in their attempts to know western lifestyle, to follow their lead, and to invite other Arabs to do the same have come across these myths and have been mesmerized by them as a result of their immediate experience and encounter with western life and culture.

5. Sohrab Sepehri, Gibran Khalil Gibran, and Symbols

Sohrab Sepehri has paid close attention to symbols while composing his poems. Symbolism and imagery form an essential ingredient of his poesy. Sohrab has been on a nonstop quest for truth. Regardless of what happened around him, he would make his utmost effort to attain a true and original faith and conviction in existence and what lies beyond it, as a result he traveled a lot and read a lot of books, the fruit of this tireless ordeal is his matchless mystical and intuitive poems. Through these quests, Sohrab has arrived at many hidden mystical layers, and in order to express and share his findings with his audience, he has relied on two means, namely, nature and symbols. He has chosen nature for his deep bond with it, as he has well heard the music of creation. His reason for choosing signs and symbols is following the lead of his predecessors in holding that symbolism is the best means to communicate mystical and metaphysical perception and experience. Thus, Sohrab’s poetry best fits the following statement by C. G. Yung saying that man consistently uses symbolic forms and structures to express and display concepts that elude human definition or understanding. (1993: 36)

Probably, when Sohrab says, “I come from the sun’s companionship, / Where is shade?” In fact, by mentioning ‘the sun’ Sohrab shows that he has discovered truth and needs to reflect it in the form of sun rays which are to be contrasted with shade which signifies ignorance and solidity, and it is in this manner that Sohrab manages to imaginatively express his poetic and mystical experience and understanding of abstract truths. (Delachaux, 1985: 9) However, Sohrab believes in Unitarianism, so he does not admit the inclusion and expression of some elements and phenomena at the cost of excluding and eliminating other divine creations, for in Sohrab’s world view existence has a unique path wherein all creatures take a course that leads to perfection, thus he says,

“I wonder, / Why do they say that a horse is a noble beast, that doves are beautiful? / And, why no one finds a vulture in anyone’s cage? / Why should clover be inferior to red tulips? / Eyes should be washed and cleansed, / We should look differently, / Words should be washed and cleansed, / A Word should be rain itself, a word should be wind itself.” (2010: 278)

Gibran Khalil Gibran, too, has masterfully developed an individual stylistics and symbolism to express his understanding and experience. Gibran’s keen observation of natural elements has aided him in expressing his perception and internal resources. However, Gibran’s symbolism is not consistent, for although he is strongly dependent on symbolic expression in “The Prophet” or “The Processions”, in other works his diction is not very much symbolic. Seyyedi believes that Gibran is the first author to enter symbolism in contemporary Arabic literature. Ilyas abu Shabakah, Mikhail Nua’ima, and Ilia abu Madi consider Gibran the pioneer of Arabic symbolism, in such a manner that language does not lose its freshness and vigor. (2005: 113) Gibran’s tendency for symbolism follows the general trend affecting most contemporary Arab authors, that is, he is both familiar with and accustomed to the western tradition and is an individual who is concerned with the social issues and problems of his own time and place.

5.1 Water Symbols in Sohrab Sepehri’s Works

In Sohrab Sepehri’s poetry water, like other natural elements, is of high frequency. In most instances, water has a figurative-symbolic significance. In the poem “An Episode”, water is the symbol of life and the boat stands for the poet himself who needs water for its fresh dynamicity and vigor, without which he is dead and lifeless:

“A boat has survived near the shore, / Night covering its head, / Its body from a dark path, / Immersed into the bitter perception. / Nobody is there to come, / And cast the boat in the sea, / And at a moment when every high wave, / Speaks to the hidden ear, / A disturbed wave arrives to tell, / The story of a stormy night.” (sohrabsephri.com: July 2, 2014: 123)

Sohrab in “Till the Wet Pulse of Morning”, speaks of words that live amidst water and are as such pure, clear, lucid, and fresh. Sohrab draws on water and its symbolic implications to elucidate the import and significance of his artistic understanding:

“One came and took my books, / He drew a ceiling of flowers over my head, / He expanded my evening with frequent windows, / He placed my desk under a rain of idealism, / Then we sat, / We talked about trees and hours, / Among the words living midst water, / Out time under the right clouds, / Like the dizzy body of an unexpected dove, / It had a pleasant space.” (Sepehri, 2010: 386)

In Sohrab’s poems, water is the symbol of knowledge and awareness as he says in the opening lines of “The Footfall of Water”:

“And a God who is nearby, / Within these gillyflowers, at the foot of yonder lofty oak, / On the stream’s awareness, on the plant’s law.” (sohrabsephri.com: July 2, 2014: 99)

All in all, in Sohrab’s poetry, water has the three symbolic functions of purity, freshness, and liveliness in addition to its intellectual function.

5.2 Water symbol in Gibran Khalil Gibran’s Works

In Gibran’s view, too, water is the symbol of purity, freshness, and liveliness, besides being the symbol of knowledge and true insight. Gibran in “The New and the Marvelous” remarks:

“Before I advised myself, my thirst was a faint spark in a heap of dust, which I used to quench with a handful of spring water or by a sip of wine. But now all my love has turned to a cup and all my thirst to wine, and my loneliness to intoxication, and I am not quenched, never satisfied. However, in this burning bottomless thirst is hidden a never-ending ecstasy.” (Gibran, n.d.: 595)

Elsewhere in a story called “Loneliness and Solitude”, Gibran uses water as the symbol of both feeling and insight, and says:

“I looked at you again, and behind the walls of your strongbox I saw a heart beating in its loneliness, and I am like a thirsty man in a cage made of gold and jewels empty of water.” (Gibran, n.d.: 642)

Almost in all cultures, baptism, ablution, and cleansing is performed using water, and Gibran in the story called “The Great Sea” refers to this sense of the word and seeks water to wash and cleanse his body and soul:

“Yesterday, and how is yesterday far and near, I and my soul went to the great sea to wash off ourselves whatever earth and dust was clinging to us, and when we reached the seashore, we started looking for a place to hide us from other people’s eyes.” (Gibran, n.d., 613)

Again, elsewhere in “The Prophet and The Madman”, Gibran refers to another symbolic function of water as the source of immortality and life:

“Let me be honest with you, there is no gift in life more useful to man than that gift, which turns all his being and desires to a set of lips burning with thirst; turning all his life to an immortal living spring.” (Gibran, n.d.: 143)

6. Conclusion

The current study leads us to say that Sohrab and Gibran have both employed various symbolic functions and implications of water in their works. However, Sohrab has been basically influenced by Persian, Islamic, Buddhist, and eastern culture, beliefs, and rituals in his symbolism and mythology. Sohrab has systematically drawn upon these sources to nourish and develop his tripartite symbolic order. On the other hand, Gibran has in most part paid attention to the universal and collective aspect and function of water as a source and supplier of life, purity, and cleanliness, to be found in almost all beliefs and creeds. Water symbols are more frequent in Sohrab’s poetry, both in terms of quality and quantity.

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