Myth and History: The Great Mother Myth in the Novel of The Worshipper in his Last Tale

"الأسطورة والتاريخ: أسطورة "الأم الكبرى" في رواية" العابد في مرويّته الأخيرة

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Abstract:

Muhammad Khudair Sultan's *The Worshipper in his Last Tale* opens up new horizons in modern Arab literary narratives as it revisits heritage, drawing from its fertile sources to establish a unique literary voice. It blends the craftsmanship of historical writing with the imagination of narrative storytelling, creating the issue of the intersections between the objectivity of the reference and the creativity of its adaptation. The study examines these depths to understand the aesthetic qualities of adopting a mythological frame related to the epic of Gilgamesh, in its parts of the Great Mother and the Son of the Wilderness.

Keywords: novel; tale; mythology; Gilgamesh; history.

ملخص:

تفتح رواية العابد في حكايته الأخيرة لمحمد خضير سلطان آفاقًا جديدة في السرد العربي الحديث، إذ تعيد استحضار الموروث الثقافي مستلهمةً من ينابيعه الخصبة لتشييد صوتٍ سردي متفرّد. وتمزج الرواية بين تقنيات الكتابة التاريخية ومخيال الحكي السردي، مما يطرح

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إشكالية التداخل بين موضوعية المرجع وطاقته الإبداعية في التشكيل الفني. وتتقصّى هذه الدراسة تلك الأبعاد، سعيًا إلى الكشف عن الجماليات الكامنة في تبنّي إطارٍ أسطوري مستمدّ من ملحمة جلجامش، ولا سيما في جزئيتي الأم الكبرى وسليل البرية.

كلمات مفتاحية: الرواية؛ حكاية؛ أسطورة؛ جلجامش؛ تاريخ.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Storytelling has always been an indispensable companion to the human experience. Since the earliest stages of their existence, humans have been inclined to weave narratives that explain the phenomena surrounding them and serve as a reservoir encompassing their experiences as they forge their paths through the various realms of history through various forms of symbolic authority: divine sanctification (as in myths), factual documentation (as in history), and artistic imagination (as in the novel).

As a literary genre, the novel, with its capacity to open up to other fields, allows a return to these realms, fusing and reshaping them through the novelist's authority and the legitimacy of fiction. Although the epistemological horizon that prevails in this context is inevitably governed by the novelistic question, revisiting these realms and uncovering their objective boundaries and artistic contributions remains an urgent necessity in our interpretation of the literary text and in the construction of its meaning.

As a literary genre, the novel, with its potential openness to other domains, enables a return to these realms, allowing their fusion and reconfiguration under the novelist's authority and within the legitimacy of fictional creation. Although the epistemological horizon that dominates in this context is inevitably governed by the novelistic inquiry, revisiting these realms and uncovering their objective boundaries and artistic contributions remains an imperative necessity in our interpretation of the novelistic text and in the construction of its signification. *Mohammed Khudair Sultan* seems aware of these boundaries from the very first lines of his novel.

In his latest narrative, *al-ʿĀbid fī Marwiyyatihi al-Akhīrah* (*The Worshipper in his Final Tale)*, the author travels across time, invoking in particular the Mesopotamian Great Mother myth. Yet he does so neither in the spirit of the historian, armed with the instruments of historiography, nor with the chisel of the anthropologist tracing the archaeology of bygone eras. Rather, he approaches it through a fictional, novelistic vision that dissolves and reworks all these elements within a new hybrid poetics, in which the previously distinct components merge into a single crucible. This compels us to ask: What are the mythological and historical constituents embedded in this narrative corpus, and what is their semantic function within the text?

This study seeks to identify the principal manifestations of the Great Mother myth in the novel, to elucidate the mechanisms through which it is integrated into the narrative fabric, and to examine its influence on the output of the characters, particularly the figure of the Offspring of the Wilderness. It also aims to

uncover the symbolic and mythic dimensions that the text derives from this intertextual appropriation.

2. Myth and Mythology

Myth represents the first path that humankind has created in its attempt to comprehend existence and interpret the surrounding world. It constitutes the earliest draft of human reason that, simultaneously, reflects the simplicity and complexity of thought. In the dawn of history, this intellect was nothing but a blank page with no inscriptions on it yet or even a muscle unaccustomed to move beyond the bounds of instinct and the limits of reaction. With this modest tool, humanity embarked upon its great adventure with the cosmos, its first leap toward knowledge, and thus myth was born. (Al-Sawwah F. , 2022, p. 26)

It is, therefore, humanity's endeavour to find a point at which the existential question harmonises with reality. Myth thus has become humanity's religious reference, legal code, social convention, epistemological model, and artistic mold through which emotions and sentiments were expressed. For this reason, mythological thinking has dominated human consciousness for a long stretch of time, representing a stage that cannot be ignored or bypassed. The myth reflects humanity's capacity to possess:

> "a world of symbols and imagination in which it stores its experiences and expresses its perceptions, desires, and beliefs through mythic narratives… often set in an unknown time, attributed to an anonymous author, and feature imaginary protagonists, whether human, animal, divine, or spiritual beings. (Saïdouni, 2012, p. 254)

Thus, the myth acquires a social and a historical dimension, for it "expresses the beliefs of peoples in their beginnings and throughout their development..." (Saïdouni, 2012, p. 254)

The profound importance that myth holds in the evolution of human thought has led scholars to study and analyze it as a means of understanding a vital stage in the development of human reasoning. Therefore, mythology, or the science of myths, emerged as a field of knowledge "concerned with the study and interpretation of myths". The first component of the term, Mytho, derives from the Greek word Muthos, meaning a traditional tale about the gods, while the second component, *-logy*, signifies "the study" or "science." (Al-Sawwah F. , 2022, p. 20)

As an independent field of study, mythology is concerned with the myth in all its dimensions through research, analysis, and examination, and with understanding its diverse aspects within human cultures. This discipline, in general, seeks to define myth, study the causes of its emergence and its interpretations, and analyze its psychological, intellectual, and social functions (Al-Sawwah F. , 2022, p. 20) The myth represents a shared human heritage, through which humankind has always sought to provide explanations and justifications for its fragmented existential questions.

Myth constitutes a crucial link in the chain of human thought. Any researcher in this field cannot disregard the significant role it played in the life of early humankind. As has been noted, myth is no different from metaphysics in developed cultures, elevating the status of philosophy, as it also explores fundamental ideas about existence and meaning; however, it does

so through symbols, narrative, imagery and ritual actions rather than abstract philosophical concepts. (Al-Sawwah F. , 2001, p. 20) In those early stages of human existence, man sought a means to comprehend his being.

3. Myth and History

History is grounded in objectivity, which reflects narrated truth according to the scientific standards and principles upon which the discipline of history is founded. Myth, by contrast, is a narrative in which understanding is interwoven with imagination, and reality is interpreted through symbols. Despite the apparent contradiction between them, the two are not entirely disconnected; rather, they intersect and mutually inform one another. The myth represents:

> "a literary expression of the activities of early humankind, who had not yet developed a historical writing method that would enable them to record their daily events. The myth thus served as the vessel through which early humans encapsulated their thought, and as the means by which they expressed that thought and their various social, political, religious, and economic activities." (Ahmed, 1997, p. 24)

Hence, myth may be regarded as the raw material of history, the earliest form of historical writing; a form that had not yet adhered to the scientific rigor or established principles of historiography. Through myth, early humans conveyed their "perception of events and beings, interpreting and explaining them according to a mind not yet refined by critical or analytical reasoning." (Ahmed, 1997, p. 24)

For this reason, early historiography relied heavily on mythical narratives and mythic descriptions of historical events, reflecting the mental framework of ancient peoples; one characterized by a distinct conception of time and space and a unique sensibility toward both. Accordingly, myth constitutes a crucial passage in the formation of historical consciousness among human societies. Indeed, it is the initial stage of such consciousness. History itself, therefore, may be viewed as the offspring of mythic thought, for "the beginnings of history are intimately linked to the closing stages of the age of myth." (Ahmed, 1997, p. 25)

Myth and history are similar in various ways; they both share a common concern with human activity and are both intertwined with reality and imagination. Thus, the distinction between them should not be viewed as a contradiction, but rather as a form of harmony that expresses an intrinsic truth within human nature, ever driven by the desire to understand, to reason, and to reflect upon its surroundings.

4. The Myth of the Great Mother

The mythical component emerges as a central element in Muhammad Khudayr Sultan's novel, *The Worshipper in his Last Tale*. It is manifested through various textual strategies, mainly through the explicit revival of mythological symbols within the narrative. Yet it goes beyond mere reference as Sultan employs a primordial human, striving to comprehend the contemporary phenomena surrounding him and to articulate a profound vision that both interprets and redefines this reality.

Human beings have always been myth-makers, and in this novel, Sultan draws a symbolic tableau that embodies his own narrative mythology. This symbolic tablet stretches from the walls of Uruk to London, Moscow, Istanbul, and Mecca, among other cities, transforming the novel into a vast imaginative space where past and present, myth and history, reality and fantasy intersect and merge. The result is a modern Babylonian epic, woven by the novelist in a resonant, symbol-laden language, rich in meaning and interpretive depth.

Myth, in this sense, provides the narrator with a boundless creative field in which he roams freely, weaving the story according to his own vision. The novel thus becomes a literary space of inspiration drawn from ancient Eastern myths, particularly Babylonian and Assyrian mythology.

In constructing his modern myth, Muhammad Khudayr Sultan follows the model of ancient Eastern mythologies, in which the female figure occupied a central position within early societies as a direct symbol of fertility, motherhood, growth, beauty, and love. This derives from the anthropological view that:

> "the earliest human communities were not founded under the leadership of the male warrior or hunter, but rather coalesced naturally around the mother figure, whose affection, protection, and care gathered her children into the first cohesive human unit, the matriarchal family, the nucleus of a broader matriarchal society." (Al-Sawwah F. , 2002, pp. 31-32)

A return to Mesopotamian civilization reveals an abundance of female mythological symbols that express the central value of

woman within the social and cosmic order, as she embodies the essence of absolute maternal generosity. As one mythic formulation proclaims:

> "In the beginning there was Ishtar, and none beside her. She was motherhood itself, containing within her the primordial principles … What issued from her was part of her, inseparable and continuous, an emanation of her body's spontaneous movement, not of abstract thought or of independent, purposive will." (Al-Sawwah F. , 2002, p. 43)

Through this reimagining, Sultan revives the myth of the Great Mother as an archetypal matrix for creation and continuity, merging the ancient symbolic feminine of Mesopotamian lore with contemporary existential questions about origin, renewal, and the enduring power of life.

Babylonian culture abounds with the idea of the Mother Goddess, the divine feminine who embraces and sustains the lineage of civilization through her sacred womb, a sanctified vessel immortalized in statues, tablets, and archaeological relics. This image was celebrated in countless artistic and ritual forms as a symbol of creation, fertility, and continuity:

> "The Great Mother is the source of all things and the sustainer of all living beings; she fills the universe with fertility and with the causes of growth. This abstract image was never at odds with the concrete, embodied depictions of the Great Mother. For if the entire cosmos manifests itself as a temporal and spatial unfolding of her being, then every part of that cosmos, considered in its essence, is also she. The blue dome of the sky

that spreads its cover over the Earth is the Great Mother…" (Al-Sawwah F. , 2002, p. 50)

Thus, in Babylonian cosmology, the Mother Goddess represents both the material and metaphysical foundation of existence, a unifying principle through which all natural and divine forces are expressed. She is simultaneously the origin, the medium, and the perpetuation of life, encompassing in her figure the totality of being.

The novelist, Sultan, is clearly aware of this mythic dimension, as the opening line of his work immediately evokes the presence of the Great Mother, who appears before the reader just as she once descended from the heavens of the wilderness to deliver her progeny, a scene that transcends temporal boundaries. She is Ishtar, the ancient goddess whose essence lingers in the depths of myth, and who reappears in the narrative's present under the sign of her eight-pointed start. Through this symbolic return, Ishtar becomes a source of new creation, enabling the author to compose a contemporary Sumerian epic that unfolds alongside the legendary tales of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, within reach of their eternal city, Uruk. In doing so, the novelist revives the archetype of the Mother Goddess as a means to connect antiquity with modernity, transforming the ancient Babylonian myth into a metaphor of renewal, continuity, and cultural rebirth.

In The Worshipper in his Final Tale, the novelist returns to the ancient city of Uruk in Mesopotamia, engaging in a formative ritual inspired by the archetype of the Great Mother. In ancient cultures, this figure was associated with fertility, birth, the earth, and water. As the text states:

"All the gods look down from the heavens of their cities, except for the Great Mother, who gazes from the sky of the wilderness. All of them, male and female alike, perform the act of creation only after the stones of temples have been raised, the crowns of kings established, and sovereignty secured. Only the Great Goddess of fertility transcends these confines; she dwells above the eight-pointed polar star, the Cedar forest, the woolen tents, and the reed thickets. She bends tenderly over shepherds, waters, and fishermen, and from beyond the walls of Uruk, she brings forth a child of the wilderness." (Sultan, 2023, p. 19)

Although the novel does not reproduce the primordial creation myth in its literal Sumerian or Babylonian form, it nevertheless draws inspiration from both traditions. The opening scene, depicting the creation of a new being, heralds the birth of a new narrative embodied in this figure, the "offspring of the wilderness." This being is fashioned from the clay mingled with the waters of the two rivers, beyond the mythical walls of Uruk, under the protection of the eight-pointed star, the symbol associated with the goddess Ishtar (or Inanna), whose primary emblem is the planet Venus. Among the Babylonians, this symbol also represented the unity between Ishtar and the god Anu.

The choice of the Great Mother in this cosmogonic ritual was by no means coincidental; rather, it symbolizes rebirth and transformation, a passage from one state of existence to another, orchestrated and nurtured by the maternal deity. In ancient times, humanity perceived woman as the:

> "counterpart of the fertile and fruitful earth. As the discoverer of agriculture and the guardian of seeds, woman was elevated to the rank of divinity…[the] Mother Goddess later came to be regarded, within the framework of religious belief, as the very source of the earth's fecundity." (Al-Majidi, 1997, p. 82)

As all mythical beings are traditionally believed to descend from the heavens, the Great Mother in this narrative emerges instead from the sky of the wilderness, a terrestrial sky. The sky motif assumes profound significance in this scene as the sky was conceived as an "immense, incomprehensible, and unattainable structure, eternal in its existence. It embodied transcendence, otherness, and divine remoteness, beyond human influence or access." (Armstrong, 2008, pp. 21-22)

In this novel, however, the sky becomes earthlier and intimately connected with human reality, as the Great Mother descends from her celestial heights without awaiting "the building of temples, the crowning of kings, or the establishment of sacred orders. Instead, she rises above the eight-pointed polar star, over the Cedar forest, tents of hair, and reed thickets, showing compassion toward shepherds, waters, and hunters, and ultimately creating a child of the wilderness beyond the walls of Uruk. (Sultan, 2023, p. 19)

This scene situates the reader before a progeny born in a formative ritual stripped of the divine grandeur and tumult that once accompanied ancient creation rites. Far from the mythic walls of Uruk? which had long sheltered the greatest Sumerian myths and heroes, this offspring is marginal, born in a marginal wilderness. Nothing illustrates this marginality more clearly than the line: "All gods and goddesses appear from the skies of the cities, except the Great Mother, who appears from the sky of the

wilderness." (idem) In this passage, the novelist's use of the verb "aṭallat", whose English equivalent would be "appears", signifies elevation; traditionally a symbol of divine transcendence. (Armstrong, 2008, p. 25)Yet here, this transcendence is subdued and humanized, for it originates not from the celestial skies of the city but from the humble, earthly sky of the wilderness.

The novelist's opening with the idea of the creation myth expresses a profound need to reconstruct the fragmented narrative that was lost amid the folds of myth and history, rearranging it in a way that can only be comprehended through the novelistic text, which alone is capable of grasping all contradictions. Within this text, the thin boundaries between the real and the fabricated or the city and the wilderness are dissolved. Thus, the act of creation is not like any ordinary historical event that occurs and ends; rather, the creation of the world is an "ongoing process, and the divine struggle against chaos continues, as humankind still depends on the flow of divine energy that wards off disorder and catastrophe." (Armstrong, 2008, p. 64)

5. The Great Mother and the Mythical Birth of the Descendant of the Wilderness

The novelist incorporates yet another mythic element into his contemporary epic: the mythical birth of the "Descendant of the Wilderness." This birth occurs through a ritual in which the divine merges with the human, and the epic with the novelistic, expressed in a language of lyrical and symbolic flow. This birthing ritual constitutes the cosmogonic myth of the novel, the foundational myth from which its subsequent events emerge. The creature born is the offspring of the Mother Goddess, who

kneaded him from the pure clay of the Dahla fields and shaped him from the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates. He is, therefore, a terrestrial and celestial being, half divine, half human, like the archetypal heroes of ancient myth.

Yet, the influence of the Great Mother surpasses even his mythical birth. She had prepared him for the wilderness journey he was destined to undertake in the depths beyond the walls of Uruk "as though she were entrusting the sands with a dream fading beyond the walls, journeying with the caravans that head toward the Pole Star, a dream that pitches its tent, a house for dreams, among nomads and shepherds." (Sultan, 2023, p. 19)Through this act, the "Descendant of the Wilderness" inaugurates a new epic whose primal myth he himself embodies, and from which those dwelling outside the walls draw their own tales and legends, infused with dream and hope. The Great Mother bestowed upon him a portion of her own spirit:

> "His soul, marked by the spirit of the Mother, overflowed with dream, sorrow, and strength, animating the hunters, shepherds, and villagers from the walls of Uruk, Babylon, and Jerusalem, who gave him voice and a wilderness memory. The Mother had shaped him with dream …" (Ibid 20)

The Descendant of the Wilderness, born of the Great Mother, appears in the novel as a figure whose wild attributes closely resemble those of Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh. As the myth states:

> "The Great Mother created him in her primordial maternal image, and the hunters, shepherds, and farmers reshaped him into a new form. Thus, he began

> to transform, learning how to call out, how to howl or whistle into the horizon; they taught him how to sing and how to weep." (Ḥannun, 2006, p. 21)

This image is reimagined by the novelist in the mythical birth of the "Descendant of the Wilderness," wherein the Great Mother "takes a piece of pure clay from the fields of Dahla, masticates it in her mouth, and casts it into the wilderness among the farmers, hunters, and shepherds." (Sultan, 2023, p. 19)This resemblance extends beyond the ritual of birth that links Enkidu and the Descendant of the Wilderness, encompassing their structural and morphological configurations.

Enkidu is ntroduced as follows:

> "whom the Mother Goddess created from clay, took the form of a wild being whose body was covered with hair; his head bore long locks flowing like the ears of a grain field, and his garments resembled those of Sumukan, god of the mountain and wild beasts. He was a savage creature, knowing neither cities nor men, living among gazelles, feeding on grass… (Ḥannun, 2006, pp. 33-34)

A nearly identical description is given of the Descendant within *The Worshipper in his Last Tale*: "A descendant whose stature resembled that of shepherds and hunters; whose locks waved like the ears of wheat swaying in the gentle breeze; whose face bore the marks of the long journeying of nomads; and whose body was covered with thick, downy hair; so that he could scarcely be distinguished from the gazelles at the watering place." (Sultan, 2023, p. 19) The novel re-enacts the episode of Enkidu's seduction as depicted in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Just as Gilgamesh sent

Shamhat, who enticed Enkidu and urged him to accompany her to Uruk to meet Gilgamesh, an invitation he accepted, thus setting out to confront the king, the novel revisits this episode in a more incidental and symbolic manner. (Ḥannun, 2006, p. 34) After the "Descendant" has become accustomed to life in the wilderness among beasts and hunters, he mysteriously disappears (Sultan, 2023, p. 23) Through this allusive retelling, the novel not only reimagines Enkidu's departure from the wilderness but also transforms it into a mythic pattern of cyclical return, where myth and history merge, and the ancient tale of seduction becomes a metaphor for humanity's perpetual yearning to cross from the natural into the cultural, from instinct to consciousness.

With the disappearance of the Descendant of the Wilderness, the ancient epic fades away, giving rise to the narratives of a new epic. Mohammed Khudair Sultan envisions this new mythic cycle as a Gathering of the Ascetic (Majlis al-ʿĀbid), a continuation of the Tent-House where the Descendant once interpreted the dreams imparted to him by the Great Mother, who had made him "a cosmic point of connection through which the gods are aware of his destiny and can speak to him in their celestial language about the stirrings of his mind." (Ibid 20) His disappearance, therefore, may have been the result of this same cosmic communion; he departed unseen by anyone. This moment marks the end of the ancient epic and the birth of the new one, the novel itself, within the wilderness. Hence, the Gathering of the Ascetic supplants the Tent-House, becoming the locus where ancient and modern times converge in a mythic-epic space shaped by rapid civilizational transformations and layered historical successions.

In this transformation, the Ascetic's Gathering emerges as a modern mythic structure, mediating between the vanishing sacred of the ancient world and the fluid temporality of modernity, an ever-renewing epic of human consciousness. The era of the first epic has come to an end, after Uruk becoming but mounds covered with sand. (Ibid 25) In its place, the features of a new civilization take root, forming the tablets of a contemporary myth, wherein the villagers, called the servants of water, come face to face with the realities of the modern world beyond their once-isolated wilderness. Soon, however, they open themselves to this new world, though wonder never leaves them. The words on page 26 encapsulate the transition from myth to modernity, where the remnants of the ancient epic yield to the emergence of a new civil order, yet beneath the signs of progress, the primordial elements, water and sand, remain the enduring symbols of origin and continuity.

Life beyond the village, stretching far into the wilderness, differs profoundly from life within it. Thus, astonishment and wonder never fade from the faces of the villagers as they gradually discover the contours of modern civilization. Encountering a present that contrasts sharply with their own past, they begin to reconsider both their history and their existence (Ibid 27) The novel presents a symbolic tension between memory and transformation, illustrating how the encounter with modernity reawakens an ancient consciousness that remains perpetually caught between the wilderness and civilization.

This gathering assumes a symbolic dimension, serving as a repository that records the memories of those who have passed through it and captures their dreams. It functions as a reservoir of

collective memory (Ibid 29) It stands instead as a metaphoric space of remembrance and renewal, where the sacred and the secular, the communal and the personal, intersect, an evolving archive of a people negotiating their identity between the residues of myth and the emergence of modern consciousness. This imagery encapsulates the novel's vision of continuity amid transformation: the revival of ancestral wisdom within a modern framework, where myth, memory, and creativity intertwine to weave a renewed cultural and existential tapestry. Stories, characters, and epochs succeed one another; first, the figure of al-ʿĀbid, whose equivalent in English would be the Ascetic or the Worshipper, and furthermore, the figures of Shaykh Shahin and his two sons, Warid and Jubayr, Fadlah and the town poet, Sayyid Husayn al-Taliqani, John Smith, and Buṭrus Fasili. Yet the Ascetic remains steadfast, like the ancient traditions themselves. It is a generous vessel of collective memory, (ibid 25-26) where it stands as a point of contact between the dawn of mythic history and the ensuing historical epochs, a final historiographic narrative endowed with epic resonance.

6. Conclusion

Muhammad Khudayr Sultan's novel or rather narrative tablet may be regarded as a modern cuneiform inscription, a palimpsest of vanished ages where the narrative opens to new dimensions of meaning and mythopoetic resonance. The author's use of the myth of the Great Mother and the Son of the Wilderness resembles Karen Armstrong's definition of myth as a game transcending our fragmented, tragic world, allowing us to grasp new possibilities behind the question: what if? (Armstrong, 2008, p. 14) This mythic openness grants the novel a transhistorical and

metaphysical vision, freeing it from the linearity of historical realism and enabling it to merge past and present through atemporal, cyclical movements. Furthermore, the incorporation of mythology in this novel opens a profound and expansive horizon that transcends both empirical reality and the rigid linearity of historical literalism. It has enabled Muhammad Khudayr Sultan to construct new narrative worlds in which temporal boundaries dissolve, allowing the past and present to intertwine through non-linear, reflective movements, echoing Iraq's mythical and cultural references.

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