Myths in African Literature: The Case of Kateb Yacine and Nuruddin Farah

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Abstract:

In most world cultures, literature, like the other arts, has long taken from myths as a fruitful resource of inspiration. Hence, the arts insured the survival of myths, the latter being coated with literary texts. The present paper discusses the way myths moved away from the sacred to the profane and thus became introduced into literature. First, the paper will focus on the contribution of Pierre Brunel and his interest with the "literary myth" and namely the relationship that exists between the anthropological myth and the literary myth. This paper analyzes the mythical space that marks the African literary field; essentially in the texts of the Algerian writer Kateb Yacine and the Somali one Nuruddin Farah and try to look, in particular, at the manifestation of this transformation of myths from the sacred to the profane in the texts of the aforementioned authors.

Key words: Myth, African literature, aesthetic, history, Postcolonial Literatures.

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INTRODUCTION

Most world civilizations include a very rich and diverse repertoire of myths. Arts, throughout history, have taken inspiration from myths considered as a space of inspiration *par excellence*. The present paper tries to investigate first the way myths get introduced into literature thanks to the shift of myths from the sacred to the profane. Then the paper examines the particular new role of myths in African literature through the analysis of the literary works of Kateb Yacine and Nuruddin Farah as representative cases.

2. Theoretical Considerations

2.1 The Anthropological Myth

Before taking into account the literary myth in particular, we will consider briefly a few approaches of the anthropological myth; mainly the approaches exploited by the French comparatist and theorist Pierre Brunel in his theory Mythocriticism. The Romanian anthropologist Mircea Eliade, in Aspects du mythe defines the myth as interpretation provided by primitive human beings to natural phenomena occurring around them. Eliade grants myths a religious and sacred dimension. According to him, the myth becomes a social phenomenon since it is produced by the individual and then adopted by the collective social group and accepted as a *truth.* Myths, in Eliade's view, also serve as patterns to societies that enable them to better understand themselves, through recalling them or reviving them in rituals for instance; they have accordingly a morality to teach. Hence, myths provide an "exemplary model" where the beginnings become contemporary each time. «[L]e mythe raconte une histoire sacrée; il relate un événement qui a eu lieu dans le temps primordial, le temps fabuleux des "commencements"»(9).

Eliade attributes thus a double function to the myth: the first is interpretative or hermeneutic and the second is didactic or moral.

Similarly in the conception of the Scottish anthropologist James Frazer, mythology is the philosophy of the primitive man, it is his first answers to the questions asked by the human spirit still in its youth stage. According to Frazer, the myth is a "human fetus thought" (The Golden Bough), a bad explanation to phenomena, dominated by emotions namely fear, and by a

confused desire for explanation that would be at the origin of all the beliefs (Larousse). Frazer has introduced the following stages in the evolution of human cultural forms:

> Frazer believing in the gradual evolution of cultural forms, claimed that the human thought firstly caused the formation of the primitive stage of magic, and then, at the same time as the evolution of human thought, magic was also advanced to religion, and ultimately to a more evolutionary point by the name of science. (Mas'oud Algooneh Juneghani, 20).

In the early contribution of the Ancient Greek philosopher Plato, we also find a double aspect to myths in the definition that he provides. Plato divides the Greek word *mythologia* into two parts; *Muthos* which signifies the expression of the stories of gods, goddesses, demi gods and heroes (what-is-mythos-and-logos/'), and *Logos* which means the expression of the logical truth or reason (Wikipedia, Logos). Hence, the myth, in its Classical meaning, gathers the human reason and the expression of epic heroic stories.

Many scholars believe today that there are societies, like the Western ones, where the myth is "dead", or in other words it is no longer accepted as true or valid. There are other societies, however, that still "live" their myths, in other words they still believe in the validity of myths, namely primitive societies or non-modern ones (Eliade Le sacré et le Profane, 82). Claude Levi Strauss in La Pensée Sauvage believes that even unindustrialized societies or non-modern ones are capable of valid and logical thinking (30).

In order to find out the link that exists between myth and literature, we concentrate on the discourse. In his structuralist approach, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in "The Structural Study of Myth" finds out an important dimension to the myth that complements the imaginary aspect; which is the symbolic dimension. The imaginary and symbolic aspects of the myth actually make it close to the artistic world of literature. The mythical parole represents a rich and varied resource for literature. The two worlds, according to Brunel, employ a poetic and aesthetic discourse and both address the human imaginary. In his mythocroyical approach,

Brunel focuses on the analogy between the structure of myth and the structure of texts. (Mythocritique. Théorie et parcours, 67)

2.2 Myths from the Sacred to the Profane

With the advent of science and rational thinking that emerged during the Age of Enlightenment during the 18th century in the Western world, the sacred aspect of the myth starts to weaken, the myth becomes *profane* in the expression of Eliade. The interpretations of myths to some given phenomena turned out to be irrational and non-valid. They were replaced by scientific truths based on empirical data. The myth loses therefore its sacred aspect but keeps intact its aesthetic and imaginary expression. Thus, writers from different cultures employ myths in literature maintaining this way the survival of myths. Literature has preserved myths "enrobés" in Brunel's words. Literature becomes for him "le véritable conservatoire des mythes" (Dictionnaire des mythes littéraires, 11) The myth appears in different forms in the literary texts. It is employed, for instance, as a symbol because myths have a rich symbolic significance that transcends cultural and geographical eras.

3. Myths in African literary Field

3.1 The role of Myths in African Literature

In the African culture, myths enjoy a very important position. African societies have insured cultural the African cultural continuity thanks to the oral tradition composed essentially of myths, proverbs, songs, legends, as well as other popular artistic forms. This tradition has allowed the transmission of the African values and philosophy from generations to others.

African literature, mainly the novel, is a hybrid and syncretic form in which are combined scriptural Western forms and the African oral local tradition. In the African text, the language and the genre are European but the essence is typically African. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Gatari, put, African writers use European languages but "paint them with local hues" Toward a Minor Literature, 16). Underlying its double disposition,

the Indian theorist Homme K. Bhabha insists that hybrid literature is produced in a "third space of enunciation" (The Location, 37), a space that belongs neither to the Western dominant culture nor to the local autochthone cultures. A space that is capable to insure cultural identity and favor hybridity. According to the Russian theorist Mikhaïl Bakhtine, African literature, like the other hybrid literatures, constitute "carnivalesque" forms that tend to oppose conventional forms by defying them through new subversive expressions. Bakhtin argues that:

> As opposed to the official feast, one might say that the carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed (Qtd in Ashcroft et al Post-colonial Studies,118).

Post-colonial literatures are subversive and transgressive literatures; they transgress the dominant Western canonical norms trying to affirm a culture having its own values, its own identity, its own dignity, and its own memory rooted back in a patrimony of an old ancestral history.

The myth, a space of sacrality in the past, becomes today a dynamic tool of cultural affirmation thanks to the African artistic expression. In his book entitled Myth, Literature and the African World, the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka insists on the major role of myths and African stories that preserve, according to him, the African identity through telling its experience. The major theme of the book lays claim that the most important African myths are those that enable African nations to understand and to appreciate their lives without comparing them to European experiences. Syinka's book attempts, according to him, to look into history, mythology, and literature in order to provide alienated Africans with a new and better vision of themselves. This notion becomes significant in the realm of the Western contemporary dominant vision which tends to convince those population of their inferiority and marginality, especially in the Western oriented notion of Globalization. Hence, the myth allows these people to construct a

diachronic vision of their position in the world culture in order to better recognize themselves. In his anthropological conception of the mythic thought, Lévi-Strauss highlights, in La pensée Sauvage, the myth's symbolic mediation that offers an allegorical inspiration for the members of a society which allows them to reconcile with their reality through better accepting it (15).

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3.2 Myth and History

In this respect, the postcolonial theorists Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin insist that one should not confuse "myth" and "history" (The Empire Writes Back, 81). They state that once writing is introduced in these oral societies, this leads to a different kind of consciousness that we can consider as "historical" (Ibid). In this respect, the Kenyan theorist Abdul R. JanMohammed explains that literacy and writing, by recording specific facts and "so making available in time a dense and specific past, 'will not allow memory, the major mode of temporal mediation in oral cultures, to eliminate facts that are not consonant with or useful for contemporary needs'". Literacy he explains "also destroys the immediacy of personal experience and the deeper socialization of the world and consequently the totalizing nature of oral cultures." Therefore literacy "leads to the development of a historic consciousness". It also "enables distinction to be made between truth and error and so permits the development of 'a more conscious, critical, and comparative attitude to the accepted world picture.'" However, "we need to note that history as an institution is itself under the control of determinate cultural and ideological forces which may seek to propose the specific practice of history as neutral and objective." Then, literacy would produce "a sense of change, of the human past as an objective reality available to causal analysis, and of history as a broad attempt to determine reality in every (diachronic) area of

human concern. This in turn permits a distinction between "history" and "myth"" (81).

Yet JanMohammed notes, concerning this distinction, that it does not mean that "oral societies do not have a history", and that their "tendency to generate 'mythic' rather than 'historical' accounts of the world implies" that they are not unable to reason logically or causally. However, JanMohammed argues that the "logic" and "causality" of oral cultures are more "magical", while those of the literate cultures are more "empirical". In this respect his argument joins that of the Russian theorist Tzevan Todorov about the "vulnerability of oral societies to the intrusion of literacy controlled as it is by the imperial power". (The Empire Writes Back, 82)

African writers employ myths in their literature as a device that vehicles cultural significations, a dynamic means that retraces its own history seen from the perspective of its own world view. In a postmodern approach, the African novel is part of the tradition including historiographical metafiction in which the universe of the novel becomes the space of history reconstruction as seen and lived by the people still under the traumatic effect of the Western colonial experience. The hegemonic dominant vision cast for long by the European writers, such as Rudyard Kypling and Joseph Conrad, is opposed by African texts giving their own alternative vision of history,

Hence, in the African literary context, the myth becomes an artistic catalyzer with an aesthetic value transcending both space and time as well as a means of self-affirmation, self-rediscovery, and resistance to any eventual acculturation; a way to cultural rehabilitation. Soyinka sees in the African myth a renewal with the origins. Likewise, the Martinican theorist Franz Fanon believes that postcolonial writers want to get contact with their ante-colonial past in order not to get "lost" (Les damné de la terre, 182). The myth is a crucial part of this ancestral heritage of the cultural patrimony of the oral postcolonial tradition.

3.3 Myths in Kateb Yacine's Texts

The African writers find in the African mythology a fruitful resource that enriches their fictional world. In Kateb Yacine's Nedjma, the narrator

informs about the Keblouti tribe that might have come from the Middle East through Spain, then stayed in Morocco and finally settled in Algeria under the guidance of Keblout, the head of the tribe, who was exiled, a thinker and an artist. Si Mokhtar describes him to Rachid as a wise man of high education. Keblout, the founder of the dynasty, is compared by the French scholar Charles Bonn to the Emir Abdelkader the founder "broken by the conquest" in reference to Kateb's conference in May 1947 on *Abdelkader and the Algerian Independence*. Bonn also describes the Keblout history as the "collective myth" (Kateb Yacine : Nedjma, 15)

The history of the Keblout dynasty is transmitted orally from one generation to another, and Kateb presents their traditions, customs, and deeds as the heroic past that helps the young generation build self-confidence and dignity amid the colonial dehumanizing experience. In the oral cultures, like the Maghrebian one, the collective memory is maintained by folktales, often mythical who tell history in a cyclical way.

In Kateb's play entitled "La poudre d'intelligence"; a satirical play published in 1959 in the collection of plays Le cercle des représailles, we also find a reference to the Oriental myth. The paly strongly displays mockery at the French tyrannical occupation in Algeria and at the naivety of the Algerian population in front of this foreign domination. The character of Djeha; a popular oriental mythical figure in the Oriental and Maghrebian folklore, who combines wit and opportunism, is represented in the paly as Nuage de fumée whose intelligence in a society rendered ignorant by colonialism grants him the position of a "philosopher".

The play is allegorical in many ways; the Sultan represents the French authority whose despotism and futility are shown in the paly in many instances. In spite of his high position, he still believes in the *farce* of Nuage de fumée who pretends discovering an "intelligence powder". The Sultan seems to be naïve enough to look forward for intelligence through a magic powder. The other characters in the paly also display absurdity. The merchant, for instance, who might stand for the population, is also ridiculed

by Nuage de fumée in the former's attempt to gain back his money from him.

3.4 Myths in Nuruddin Farah's Texts

In Farah's art also we find many references to African and Arabic myths. In Maps, the first novel of ''Blood in the Sun'' Trilogy, for instance, the second person narrator, talking to Askar, says to him that he was cast my his stars in the unEdenic universe. But that he was not content, "like any other intelligent being, with the small world of darkness (he) opened (his) eyes on." He blames him for behaving as though he had to find and touch the world outside of himself (11). In African mythology, the universe and the individuals are created in a harmony that should never be broken or rejected.

Another reference to mythology, this time to Oriental myth, Farah makes an analogy between Askar's uncle Qorrax who was married many times and the heroin of the Arabian Nights Scherezade, who stayed with the king like Qorrak's last wife similarly called 'Shahrawello' (12). Scherezade represents the story telling that delays death. In Maps, Farah tries to highlight the primacy of story telling about Somalian people as he says describing his purpose for writing as an attempt "to keep my country alive by writing about it" (Wikipedia). Life and storytelling become highly associated.

In Farah's Gifts, the second novel of ''Blood in the Sun'' Trilogy, Duniya, the protagonist of the novel, reminds herself that "in Somali mythology the cosmos balances on the horns of a bull, a beast that is forever staring at a cow tied to a pole right in front of him. It is said that the bull's body loses equilibrium whenever his love, the cow, turns its eyes elsewhere, and this physical shift is responsible for the earthquakes around the world" (94). Gifts is a more optimistic novel in which the triumph of love at the end with the marriage of Duniya and Bosaaso denotes the importance of and the need for love and hope in the Somali culture and society.

In Farah's novels myth are also employed as instruments of oppression by the dictatorial regime that maintains a popular condition of trans-state of

submission. Farah uses the myth of the *Father of the Nation* to show how the leading figure represents himself as national *mythical figure* to perform a stronger and lasting domination of the Somali population.

Yet, Farah produces a counter subversive discourse that dismantles the despotic construction and, at the same time, challenges it throughout the use of myths. An example from *Maps*, is the Ethiopian adoptive mother of the Somali native boy Askar. Such plurality helps in creating an African myth capable of deconstructing the official discourse. Misra stands out symbolically as the female persona who can build a new national identity, the new *motherland* capable of plurality, cosmopolitanism, and universality.

4. CONCLUSION

Both Kateb and Farah were exiled from their respective homelands because of their opposing views and positions; they both resort to literature and to myths to maintain a link with their mother lands. Myth, a space of sacrality and religious parole in the past, is introduced into the literary realm while keeping its aesthetic value and symbolic asset. In the African specific context, literature finds in the local myths historical tales and symbols that help native writers and readers build a national identity. Accordingly, the study has shown how myths become a device of cultural and political affirmation and rebellion against both foreign colonial domination and local totalitarian regimes. Literary myths in African literature make the he ancient and the cotemporary overlap in syncretic texts of great originality that stand out as the voice of national assertion in front of any illegal oppressive authority.

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