



A New Reading of the Serpent Myth in the Ancient and Modern Arab Culture

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Abstract

Starting from Babylon to Greece, India and other parts of the old world, the symbol of the serpent occurred constantly in the myth, culture and religion of man. Mediterranean deities are represented carrying a snake in one or both hands. In addition, the serpent's knowledge was associated with the wisdom of the gods. The serpent is one of the oldest symbols of female power. Woman and serpent together were considered holy in ancient Arabia, since both seemed to embody the power of life. Serpents were considered immortal because of their ability to renew themselves by shedding their old skins, while woman's procreative attributes made her seem immortal.

Raja Alem's novel *Fatima: A Story of Arabia* (2002) is concerned with this mystic relationship. The heroine is a semi-illiterate woman who has the ability to cross over the human domain into the reptile world. She is a woman-serpent. This paper will use the cultural approach to explore the mysterious relationship between woman and serpent as presented in the novel. The focus will be on how the image of woman-serpent has developed and metamorphosed from ancient Arabian age into modern times, shedding lights onto historical facts and cultural innuendoes.

Key words: Serpent; Goddess; Arabian woman; Pre-Islamic religion; Arabian Peninsula

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INTRODUCTION

Literature and myth are two interrelated fields and there is an infinite relationship between the two fields; as Northrop Frye asserts that a myth is a "structural organizing principle of literary form"; (Anatomy, p. 341). He continues in *The Stubborn Structure* to define as:

Mythology as a whole provides a kind of diagram or blueprint of what literature as a whole is all about, an imaginative survey of human situation from the beginning to the end, from the height to the depth, of what is imaginatively conceivable. (The Stubborn: 102)

Therefore, myth is the first form of literature and the knowledge of mythology would certainly help in analyzing literature and revealing its secrets and illusions. Mythology takes the reader to prehistory and the biography of gods and goddesses. Since the end of the nineteenth century, mythologies together with modern anthropology help in understanding the depth of literature and its reflection of human experience. They help to dive into literature searching for what lay beneath the surface of man's accumulated knowledge. Anthropologists like Sir James Frazer have great influence on 20th and 21st centuries' literature as exemplified in creative writers such as James Joyce and T. S. Eliot. The influence is not restricted to the western world but it encompasses the whole world literature as this paper tries to explicit.

However, the millennium witnessed a feminist interest in mythology and in eastern prehistoric woman status; it manifests a longing to the woman goddess Age. A deep nostalgia for an utopian state; weighing woman's gain and loss throughout history. The divinity of the woman is brought back. In addition, the woman's supernatural powers that were attributed to her during the Age of Ishtar and Annana are granted to her in the modern age through the woman novelist as we see in Raja Alem's *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* (2002). It is the first novel to be published in English by a Saudi novelist and this fictional

work blends dreams, myths, and prehistoric figures in this imaginative tale.

FATIMA, THE RESURRECTED GODDESS

The tale is about a young peasant Arabian girl, Fatma, whose father marries her off to a serpent-handler. Her husband's capital is a collection of a farm of serpents. He extracts venom from his serpents and sells that to the people who use it to make remedies. One of these creatures bites her then she embarks into a magical journey of transformation and empowerment. She gains a mysterious resemblance to these serpents. Fatma becomes talented in controlling her kingdom of serpents and she is capable of traveling beyond the realm of ordinary human experience.

Thus, the novel brings into life the essence of the classic literature, the reader is reminded of Hera, Isis, and Ishtar. It is a legend, as the legend is a cultural story where the supernatural takes the major role in it. Fatima is the representative of the divine power in the tale. She embodies all the pre-historic feminine magnificence and beauty. The novel is a mixture of mythology, religion, history and anthropology. The relationship between the actual and the unreal in the novel is fluid. The mythology is wrestling with the culture and restrictions imposed on both man and woman and this goes in hand with Kathryn Hume's assertion that myths: "assert values that cannot be validated scientifically, and the stories they tell are most decidedly not verifiable – creation, activities of the gods, the deeds of semi-divine beings and culture heroes"; (14).

Thus, Fatima expresses the inner self of the woman. The ancient goddess is resurrected in this literary work. The goddesses of Arabia from north to south are manifested in the person of our heroin Fatima. The heroin is heroic and godly figure in a modern sense; she is not set apart from the human life and daily routine. Fatima has a common ground with the reader especially the female reader and this ground is what makes her a heroic character. She lives the ordinary life of everyone but she has goddess' characteristics which even her husband apprehend: "as she {Fatima} was looking at her husband, his heart and soul opened before her like a book. The vision was so nakedly clear that she had to look away to leave him some privacy"; (27). She can sense things and has an insight which penetrates man's soul and that in its self is an elevation above other mortals.

THE WOMAN, SERPENT, AND THE DEVIL

The novel plays on a cultural string that connects the woman with the serpent and the devil. This ancient triangle is echoed in religions too and in well-known proverbs in most cultures. The triangle in popular cultures is founded to attack the male. The male is presented as the victim of the collaboration among the three angles

of the triangle. The novel presents that clearly in the relationship between the woman and the devil presented in her powerful imagination where the illustrations and paints become real people and servants to her as Noor the engraver in the wall. And the serpents who understand her, the connection between her and the serpents becomes stronger with the emerge of the blue line that appeared suddenly on her body:

One night, a thin line of dark blue fringed with wings of silver shot down from her chin, rippled between her breasts, continued down the middle of her belly, right through her naval, and sank out out of sight in the dark triangle Later, after Fatima had spent another night swimming in the darkness and the musical light, tiny images developed along the blue line. After that, no more lines or images appeared. (38).

The line and images are a work of art: beautiful and unique. They recall the female serpent's body that is decorated with circles. In the Arabic language, which is the author's native language, the connection between the woman and the serpent is very strong as the female serpent is called "Raqsha" which means the skin is decorated with lines and circles that adds beauty to it. That is why in Arabic the woman's soft choice of words is called "tarqish" meaning to add grace and delicacy to her daily conversation. The connection between the serpent and the woman is established also through the gradual transformation of Fatima and the new senses she acquires after the serpent's bite:

Fatima's body began to change. She was able now to detect the heat of any approaching body. The dimmer light happened to be, the more sensitive she was. She would sit still and let her senses locate every object in the house, itemizing them one by one, until finally she reached a state in which her body was able to pass through walls and travel some distance to locate things moving outside. Needless say, she was also able to identify all the snakes in to her husband's vast collection; (38).

The connection is not only in the appearance but also in the senses. The new senses or skills that are newly attributed to Fatima are those of a serpent whose high sensitivity can feel the approaching of others from a distance.

THE CULTURAL VIEW OF THE WOMAN

However, the connection between the woman and the serpent is based on stories from the *Old Testament* and this connection is reflected in the renaissance paintings as in Masolino's *Temptation of Adam and Eve* (1425), which is placed in Brancacci chapel in Florence. In the painting, the viewer sees a serpent with a woman's head shading the woman's, Eve, head but not the man's, Adam, though both are standing close to each other. The painting as any one can see show an obvious resemblance between the serpent with woman's head, hairstyle, and features and the standing woman. This resemblance emphasizes the link between the two as a source of temptation and evil.



Historically speaking, women were often negatively connected with the serpent as we have seen in the previous Frisco which reflects the culture of its time. Most paintings in the Renaissance period present the serpent with a woman head and the lower part of a serpent. This presentation indicates the woman as a collaborator with evil if not its own personification.

However, a question springs out of all these texts and paintings: was it always that way with the woman? It is a question that demands a serious thoughtful answer and takes us back to the first paragraphs of this paper. To answer it one should go back in time, to early human awareness of good and bad, to the first realization of a divine power beyond man's perception. The Neolithic and Paleolithic eras had a holy image of the woman. She is the giver of life, gives birth and feed milk. She is as mysterious as the land that gives man crops according to certain seasons, all living things come out of it and goes back to it; (Campbell, p. 56). So the connection was earlier established between the earth and the woman and therefore the woman becomes the representative of the divine power. The ancient civilization in the Mediterranean area left us many mud icons of pregnant women, carrying a child, holding spike of grain, or holding two snakes. As one can see in the picture



dated 22-24000 BC. This is Crete Ishtar who was worshiped in the north of Arabia and in the Mediterranean area.

Women have held sacred status since primeval time.

In the ancient times, the sacred feminine was captivated in the way she is represented. She has been presented as a body from which all life sprung. This body was round, curved, voluptuous, and the center of worship by both men and women. But it was within this body the woman came to be defined, her ability to give birth and nurture creation made her the ultimate icon of worship. But she was also a force to be feared through her connection with the serpent, the representative of knowledge and eternity. The ancient Sumerian text documents the story of Inanna, queen of heaven and earth, the most revered diva:

Inanna, known to Semites as Ishtar, was also referred to as the first daughter of the moon and the morning and evening star...she was a multifaceted goddess with prolific powers, including the power over fertility and the fecundity of plants, animals, and humans; (18).

The ancients also were amazed by the woman monthly cycle which they connected with that of the moon as the inhabitants of Mesopotamia believed that the full moon is the day of Ishtar's monthly demonstration and she rests in it. They called that day Shabbât and for that reason there were many taboos like eating cooked food; (62). No wonder the first sculpture was for Ishtar.

Therefore, as Campbell remarks, these early sculptures were not there for their beauty or to satisfy man's artistic taste but were rising from a deep religious feeling; (Campbell, p. 325). This religious feeling connects the female with the serpent. Almost all female goddesses are associated with the serpent as one can see here the Babylonian Ishtar wearing a crown with a two-headed serpent.

In another tableau Demeter gives Metaneira, the goddess of harvest, the first Wheat spike and a serpent rises behind her though here the serpent is not clearly obvious but it is in the original tablu. The Egyptian goddess Isis is presented in a sculpture on a throne of a giant copra, the holy serpent in the ancient Pharonic era.

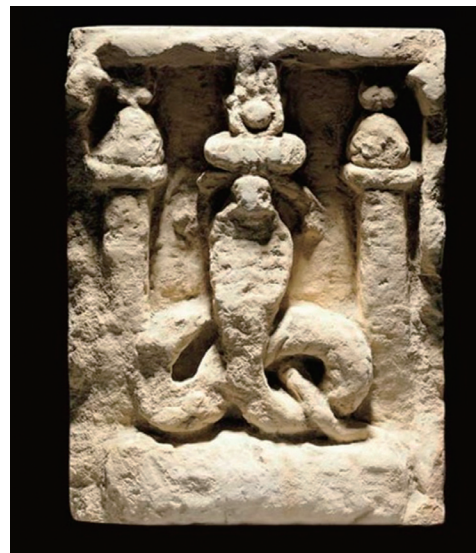
All these reoccurring images enforce the connection between the goddess and the serpent in different ancient civilizations.

A Babylonian text describes Ishtar with a body covered with a serpent's scales; (309); and that proves the link between the woman and the serpent since early civilizations. Ancient mythology always connect goddesses with animals and the serpent is one of them; (143). The serpent has been always the representative of the divine being on earth in ancient polytheistic religions as Hofner mentions about the Arabian god, wed "where his name was found written next to a serpent"; (315).

Moreover, Albright stresses the connection between the serpent and the goddess (serpent-lady) where the serpent represents the goddess Hathor in ancient Egypt. The engravings in Sinaitics written around 15th century BC south east Saina stands a witness to the serpent divinity and its status as a representative of god whose names are stated clearly; (39).



Demeter and Hekate, c. 450 BCE



Thus, both woman and serpent were conceived in ancient times as sacred and both manifest the mystery of life. Ancient man believed in the immortality of the serpent as he believed strongly that it has the power to renew itself by shedding its skin so is the woman through the cycle of pregnancy and giving birth. In the religious conscious the woman is associated with the serpent as the embodiment of enlightenment and wisdom. She is the one who fed Adam from the tree of knowledge. Also in the Arabic language the words “serpent” and “life” are related to the name “Eve”.

FATIMA THE SEPANT

These ancient believes are resurrected in *Fatma*. The novel is the story of the glory of the female and her lost

kingdom. Fatma embodies her female ancistores, she is Innana, Ishtar, and the Arabic pre-Islamic goddess, Allat. She creates a world where she dwells among her populatoin whom are mostly serpents. The connection between the heroine and the ancient goddesses is established from the opening chapter. The reader is told that Fatima descends from Taif city, Taif is the home of the pre-Islamic Arab idol Allat and was mostly worshiped there. It is represented with a white squared stone with many engravs. The ancient Arab erected a temple around it and it is mentioned in the Muslim’s holy book *Quran* as one of the major goddesses of the ancient Arab. This idol manifests in the novel in the white wall where the serf Noor is painted and he plays the role of the goddess’ priest, he is under her command:

She discovered a strange shadow on the side of the flintstone

basin. It was shaped like a human body, but the face was featureless. Though she spent several days meditating on the shape, she was unable to persuade it to talk to her; (Alem, p. 28).

The engraves here took the shape of a man whom she called Noor and who will be her priest. Noor here is the shape of a man and later to take the feature of the knight on the old urn she has who is half man and half lion: "She smiled hazily and focused on the exquisite figure holding a flag in one hand and lion's tail in the other"; (Ibid., p. 12). The man-lion here has a significance in the Babylonian mythology, he is Nadushu-namir whom the gods sent to help Ishtar and has a power to go through Hades seven gates to save the goddess; (Mackenzie, p. 321). Here Noor is performing the same task and helping Fatma to go beyond her limited world. He also has powers but his are those of the imagination.

The connection between Fatima and Allat goes beyond the city and the stone and emphasizes Fatima's sacred status in the novel and in the reader's consciousness. Herodits mentions that Allat is the plant Venus which is also known as Ishtar in Babyle and her worship is based on love and sensuality; (Langdon, p. 34). This sensuality is presented in Fatma's imaginative world or her kingdom as she calls it:

With the heels of her hands she sculpted the column of his neck. She moved to his chest, rubbing it, then dropped down swiftly and stuck the little finger of her left hand lightly in his navel; then further down, gently probing every fold, muscle shadow; (84).

This sensuas description reveals a lustful nature, a woman who has an enormous sexual appetite and who is not satisfied yet. Again this reminds us of Ishtar and Innana who have many lovers.

Fatma's godly status is stressed in the fact that she has no siblings, no parents alive, no friends, she does not have any earthly connections. The only memory she has is of her grandmother who also has mysterious power and mystic past that ordinary people lack, she is more of a legend than a woman. The grandmother stands for the glorious ancient past of the female. Queen of serpent's voice is described as follow:

Indeed, the sound she made was not human. This was the first time she had truly conversed with any one from the outside world, and she discovered that the language she used was other than human; it seemed a mixture of wind and the slithering of snakes; (92).

She is not a pure human, her tongue speaks the language of nature not human beings as she describes it here and was surprised to discover that about herself who mixes with the supernatural world rather than the earthly one.

Fatma the modern goddess is the queen of serpents whom she finds herself among and the serpents in their turn give in to her. They understand each other, there is a tangible bond between them. In the novel the relationship

between Fatma and the Great Horned Black serpent is a strange one. The serpent sacrifices its self for the goddess, all its features are transformed to Fatma through the supposed to be deadly bite. The woman surprisingly does not die but acquires new characteristics. The reader is not informed of the mechanics of the transformation only that Fatima went through fever then a deep sleep and her color has changed, but what happened within her, where did she live mentally during that period is a pure mystery to the reader as well as to her father and husband. Fatma comes back from her mysterious etherial trip changed with new powers beyond the morals' understanding. She becomes more a snake than a woman in her senses. Although the serpent dies shortly after biting Fatma but its spirit dwells within Fatma's body. She understands without being trained the serpents and they do too. The female serpent is known for the beautiful paints on its skin. Fatma receives a beautiful unusual scar on her body starting from her chin down to the end of her belly. The scar's color is different from that of her silky body just like the color of the serpent skin. Sajjr, the husband, becomes fearful of her. He feels her powers overwhelming him, her eyes scare him though she is still the submissive wife but he is afraid of her, of her looks, and of her delicate movements. The serpent-woman's movement is undetected any more, Sajjr is unable to hear her steps as if she crawls without sound. Still, she is under his well, he can release her, abandon her and leave her die alone to die alone, or rape her. But now she has a divine power within her. The power is new to her, she discovered that she is capable of penetrating his soul so she chooses not to look directly into his eyes so as not to invade his secrets as mentioned earlier.

The intamate relationship with her husband takes the shape of a rape, it is not an act of love making any more. This act of rape is another connection with the ancient goddess Innana/Ishtar who was raped by a mortal, also she becomes in this scene Ereshkigal the Sumerian and Babylonian Death goddess who also represents the other side of Innana; (158). The goddess rejects the rape and decides to punish the man and the punishment is destructive:

Fatma's body made a decision on its own. Her muscles convulsed, becoming hard as emerald, and gripped his sword. he drew back in shock but was unable to pull out. The soft feminine sinews had taken control. Ignoring Sajjr's curses and threats . . . Let go of me! he hissed. He grabbed her thighs and punished them . . . Sajjr was crying . . . But he, for some reason, was writhing on the floor clutching his groin.; (142-3)

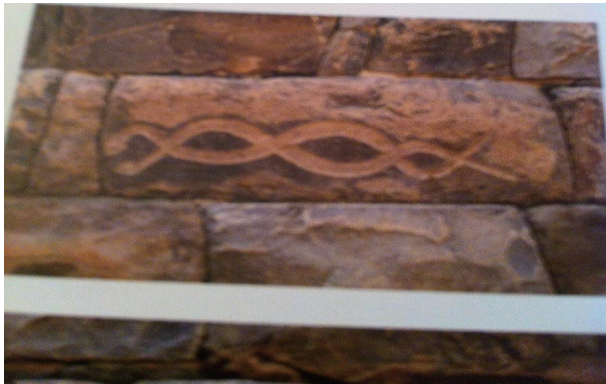
The goddess's wrath is horrible and that is clear in the mythology. Ishtar's temple is populated with uniques; (405). So is Fatma, she decides, or her body does, to punish the husband who could not win her love and kept raping her and the punishment is to be an eternal one: not to perform sexually with any other woman.

Moreover, connection with the ancient goddess is even made stronger with the ancient Arabian goddesses. They,

unlike Greek goddesses, do not give birth just like Fatma who curves to have a baby and even feels a life within her womb but nothing there: "Fatma's suspicion that she was pregnant grew stronger. She willed her body to display the seed hidden inside"; (117). The serpents are her people and children, they multiply in number with her blessing. This blessing recalls the ancient arabian goddess Um Atar, the goddess of fertility in the southern Arab peninsula. The Sebaens worshiped her, she is the equal of Ishtar in the north; (42). The novel gives a vigorous description of her kingdom in the south, Najran, with rich images of gardens and serpents:

She found herself in the company of the king, who was introducing her to his subjects. Their images were contained in an enormous jewel. Looking closely at the gem, she recognized the prisoners of the snake farm, all the serpents who had stood by her during her years of marriage. Each snake wore a crown, and all of them were rearing their heads over enormous mounds of treasures. They gazed back at Fatma with kind, knowing eyes; (88).

Serpents are the only inhabitants of the gardens. Although the description is more a dream than a reality in the novel but archeologists emphasize the holiness of the serpent at that part of the ancient world as the picture here illustrates the inscription of a serpent on the city wall of Najran to guard it As this picture shows; (Exhibition: 357)



The serpent was to the ancient people of the south of Arabia the representative of the idol and their protector. The tablet 188 in Aden's museum shows the serpent circles the god's name letters.

However, this connection between the ancient myth and the contemporary heroine goes as far as her name. The author chooses for her the name "Fatma" which is a very old fashion name in Arabia now but it is a pre-Islamic one and has deep roots in Arabic language. It received popularity after Islam as it is the name of the prophet's favorite daughter and the apple of his eyes.

The name has its significance to the theme of this paper. According to the famous Arab linguist Ibn Manzur: "the verb fatim in Arabic means to cut or to separate"; (نبا (روظنم). Fatima is a noun derived from this verb therefore the choice of the name highlights the divine nature of the heroin and her aspiration from this world.

Hence, the novel brings to life the ancient believes and myths exposing in that a feminist longing for the glorious past. The three holy icons: woman, evil, and serpent are brought back as power that comes over man but does not hurt it only protect its entity. The myth becomes here a woman's refuge from the ill treatment of the present. The novel emphasizes the woman inherited historical crisis of marginalization. It expresses anger and a sense of injustice mingled in limitless imagination of the woman-goddess. Mythology with all its implications is used to bring back an imaginative world that will never be true.

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