A Mythological and Archetypal Reading of Abdullah Radhwan's Poetry

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Abstract:

This study explores the employment of myth in the poetry of the Jordanian poet and critic Abdullah Radhwan (born 1949) as a representation of the deepest feelings of human life and an expression of the meaning of the universe. To achieve this aim, this study will concentrate on how he employs his mythical and archetypal background in his challenging poetry. The research responds in specific to the approach of archetypal and mythical criticism that establishes the significance of myth, and examines its relationship to archetypal patterns, highlighting how this criticism gets its impetus from the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung who has postulated the concept of the "collective unconscious". This research takes its lead from showing how Jungian archetypal and mythological criticism would view Radhwan's poems as recurrences of certain archetypes and essential mythic formulae. The study develops gradually by analyzing Radhwan's reshaping of myth for specific political and social ends.

Keywords: Abdullah Radhwan, myth, archetypal reading, collective unconscious, Carl Gustav Jung

Introduction:

Abdullah Radhwan (b. 1949) is a prominent Jordanian poet and critic. Radhwan's poems cover various topics; his themes vary in substance to involve woman, love, homeland, Amman, consciousness, and the mission of the poet in life. His cultural background as a teacher, manager of different cultural departments, member of several cultural associations, in addition to his being an excellent reader of various subjects, has made him a cultivated poet and critic who knows how to employ his various linguistic and literary tools including myths and archetypes.

As a well cultivated postmodern poet and critic, Radhwan is fully aware that modernist and postmodernist literature is replete with the use of myth as a means of social and political commentary. In an interview with Radhwan, published under the title of :الناقد الأردني عبد الله رضوان" The Jordanian Critic Abdullah [" سوء حظي قادني للتعامل اليومي مع المبدعين ومع حياة ثقافية هشة " Radhwan: My Bad Luck Has Lead Me to Daily Truck with Creative Writers and with a Fragile Cultural Life", Yahya al-Qaysy asks Radhwan about the influence of his being a critic on his poeticism; Radhwan answers by emphasizing the fact that poetic creativity and criticism are of two different natures but they do not contradict with each other, because,

> poetry is Prometheus's unruly and dashing fire that can never be liable to rationalization, analysis and construction; it is the rebelling glowing spirit that has its special world, [while] criticism is total rationalism, planned consciousness, an analysis to be followed by study and construction through the emission of aesthetic and general social critical judgments. Since the human mind is capable of combining counterparts, there is no conflict at all. (2008, p. 312-313)

The previous quotation indicates how Radhwan appreciates the mythological background implied in Prometheus's fire. Wilfred L. Guerin et al, in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, has established the significance of myth, and examines its relationship to archetypes and archetypal patterns, emphasizing how although,

> every people has its own distinctive mythology that may be reflected in legend, folklore, and ideology--although, in other words, myths take their specific shapes from the cultural environments in which they grow--myth is, in the general sense, universal. Furthermore, similar motifs or themes may be found among many different mythologies, and certain images that recur in the myths of people widely separated in time and place tend to have a common meaning or, more accurately, tend to elicit comparable psychological responses and to serve similar cultural functions. Such motifs and images are called archetypes. Stated simply, archetypes are universal symbols. (1992, p. 149-150)

This research examines the chosen examples taking into consideration the definition of myth. According to Guerin, myths "are by nature collective and communal; they bind a tribe or a nation together in common psychological and spiritual activities" (1992, p. 149). Myth "is ubiquitous in time as well as place. It is a dynamic factor everywhere in human society; it transcends time, uniting the past (traditional modes of belief) with the present (current values) and reaching toward the future (spiritual and cultural aspirations) "(ibid). Archetypal and mythical criticism gets its impetus from the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), who "detected an intimate relationship between dreams, myths, and art in that all three serve as

media through which archetypes become accessible to consciousness"(ibid, 168). Jung, in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, defines the great artist, as someone who possesses the "primordial vision" that enables him or her to transmit experiences of the "inner world" through art; therefore the artist "will resort to mythology in order to give his experience its most fitting expression." And hence, "The primordial experience is the source of his creativeness; it cannot be fathomed, and therefore requires mythological imagery to give it form" (1933, p. 164).

Jung has postulated the concept of a "collective unconscious", which is manifested in dreams and myths of humankind and which harbors themes and images that we all inherit. Steven F. Walker, in *Jung and the Jungians on Myth*, presents Jung's belief that literature imitates the "total dream of humankind" and how Jung called mythology "the textbook of the archetypes" (2002, qtd. in Walker p. 17).

Radhwan's Mythological and Archetypal Poetic Applications:

M. H. Abrams, in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, defines Jung's concepts in relation to "Archetypal Criticism". According to Jung, archetypes are "primordial images"; the "psychic residue" of repeated types of experience in the lives of very ancient ancestors that are inherited in the "collective unconscious" of the human race and are expressed in myths, religion, dreams, and private fantasies, as well as in the works of literature (1999, p. 10). Within this context, Ahmed al-Khateeb, in his book مفرد في غمام السفر: النص الشبيه والنص الغائب: قراءات في تجربة عبد الله رضوان الشعرية [*A Term in the Clouds of Travel (The Similar Text and the Absent Text): Readings in the Poetic Experience of Abdullah Radhwan*], reads Radhwan's collection entitled شهقة الطين [The *Sob of Clay*] as dramatic poetry employing the concept of the "collective unconscious" and recalling "the memory of fertility" (2005, p. 67).

The text of شهقة الطين [The *Sob of Clay*] involves the chorus, the characters of عناة [Anat] (the female lover), "ايل" [El] (the male lover), the mother, and the father. The mythical text in this collection transforms the dramatic poetic text into a kind of ritual that recalls the concept of the collective unconscious. It takes us back to a mythical world in which the god El has the key divine function as the Father of gods, and the goddess Anat is the violent sister of the god Baal who was Master of the Earth ruling Tempest and Rain. Max S. Shapiro and Rhoda A. Hendricks, in *A Dictionary of Mythologies*, introduce Anat as: "a goddess of dew and the fertility it brings. She was the sister of BAAL. Anat brought about the sacrificial death of Mot at the time of harvest. Ritual sacrifices were under her jurisdiction, and it was her task to see that they were carried out to ensure the mortality of the gods" (1979, p. 13). On the other hand, Shapiro and Hendricks introduce El as:

> the chief god in the hierarchy of the Phoenician pantheon. He was a deity
> of the rivers and streams and their gift of fertility, and his dwelling place
> was at the source of the rivers. The name El means god in the sense of
> the supreme deity. El, the father of gods and men, is depicted in the RAS
> SHAMRA tablets as an old bearded man and is characterized as kindly
> but strong, powerful, and wise. (1979, p. 58)

Radhwan's dramatic poetic collection شهقة الطين [The *Sob of Clay*] begins with the voice of the chorus introducing El:

شائباً كالضلالة

<div dir="rtl">
لكنه لم يكن عائبا..

ساقنا كقطيع الأغاني

الى عشه

عشر صبايا حكايا
</div>

White headed

But he was flawless..

He led us like a flock of songs

To his nest

Ten fairy-tale maidens..   (2001, p. 1-5)

In *The Sob of Clay*, Radhwan makes changes in the original myth; he employs the original story of the mythical love between El and Anat, but with some amendments. For instance he does not highlight the violent aspect of Anat's character; instead, he concentrates on one aspect of her character: the lover. Haya Saleh in her article "مستويات الخطاب الشعري في مجموعةشهقة الطين للشاعر عبد الله رضوان"[''The Levels of Poetic Discourse in the Collection of *The Sob of Clay* by Abdullah Radhwan''], depicts how the character of Anat in Rahwan's collection has been modified compared to the original mythical figure of Anat that is characterized by being powerful, arrogant and proud. In *The Sob of Clay*, Radhwan transforms Anat into a helpless woman, who is oppressed by the father and brother sometimes, and by the mother at other times (2008, p. 223).

Saleh admires Rahwan's dependence on myth in this collection; he "provides his text with deep humanitarian implications that lift him towards unlimited universal horizons, […] The poet has succeeded in recalling a text from the memory of the informed receiver, that parallels the read text, by 'working' on the area of symbol and myth" (2008, p. 228). In fact this kind of success may lead to different interpretations for the same text. A case in point is the way Yousef Yousef interprets *The Sob of Clay* in his article entitled ''In في ديونهشهقة الطين عبد الله رضوان يمنح النص حياة متجددة من خلال الأسطورة"] His Collection *The Sob of Clay*, Abdullah Radhwan Gives the Text a Renewed Life through Mythology'']. Yousef reads this collection as a dramatic text that employs mythical figures to symbolize the role of the poet as a keeper of the land. According to Yousef, the myth is the mask which aims at fertilizing the poetic imagination of the poet who is embodied in El, whereas the Land of Palestine as embodied in Anat (2008, p. 142-143).

Intissar Abass, in an interview with Radhwan, published in an article entitled '' عبد الله رضوان وحوار الشعر والنقد"] ''Abdullah Radhwan and the Dialogue between Poetry and Criticism''], studies Radhwan's employment of myth. In this interview, Radhwan emphasizes that what leads the creative writer towards using mythology is the moment he feels incapable of dealing with the daily pressures caused by the deterioration of the Arab situation during the last twenty five years of the twentieth century and the beginnings of the twenty first century. Radhwan believes that the only resort for the creative writer in this case is to converse with the other by means of employing the historical in addition to the mythical (2008, p. 259).

Radhwan explains how the creative writer has to choose one of two choices: "either to reproduce the myth as it is, and here poetry has to set back for the benefit of mythology, or to deal with myth as a humanitarian substance of knowledge by reshaping and remodeling it in a method that does not contradict with its invariability, which enables it of absorbing the new conflict, or the contemporary humanist drama" (ibid). Radhwan admits that he has chosen the second choice in dealing with mythology,

> for instance, in *The Sob of Clay*, the male lover in the myth is Baal, but not El, because El gets flabby, since he is the Fore god of the Phoenicians. Baal became the god of love, but he turned into someone without ethics, almost perverted, and old, which made his character unsuitable for being a lover according to the conditions of the lover in the work, *The Sob of Clay*, therefore I reconstructed the state of love by attributing it to El himself, i.e. I have given him back his youth and affectivity. And I have also deleted the presence of the god 'Death' because there is no need for his role.   (ibid, p. 259)

Radhwan has written a poetic trilogy entitled مقام الرضوان [*Status of the Good* Will] (2006), that consists of the following collections: مقام حبيبي [*The Status of my Beloved*] (composed 2003), مقام المليحة [*The Status of the Beautiful*] (composed 2004), and مقام عمان [*The Status of Amman*] (composed 2005). In the third collection of this trilogy, Radhwan reshapes the original myth to suit his purposes. Radhwan is cautious about the reproduction of the myth; he is fully aware that the mythical figures should be dealt with cautiously. Radhwan proceeds to explain his own method of mythical employment by elaborating on how in مقام حبيبي [*The Status of my Beloved*], he has created

> an identification between the Greek, Sumerian, and Phoenician goddesses of Good and another identification between the goddesses of Evil; I have also shown the state of full marriage between the god El and the guardian goddess of Amman (Tyche) aiming at emphasizing the special unity between the Jordanian and Palestinian people; I have reemphasized this issue again in مقام عمان [*The Status of Amman*]. (2008, p. 259)

The poetic drama مقام حبيبي [*The Status of my Beloved*] presents how fortune changes leading to happier events by the unity between El and Tyche. Shapiro and Hendricks identify Tyche as the "personification of fortune. Her favor was constantly invoked, and her likeness on coins was often rendered with such symbols as a cornucopia for opulence and a wheel or ball for chance. Tyche was identified with the goddess FORTUNA" (1979, p. 200). At the beginning of his collection, Radhwan introduces Pandora highlighting her role in mythology to enhance the importance of the mythical presence as a whole in the collection. Pandora, as defined poetically by Radhwan (2006, p. 9), is similar to the one introduced by Shapiro and Hendricks. She is,

> The first woman fashioned from clay by Hephaestus at the direction of ZEUS in order to punish PROMETHEOS for having stolen fire from the heavens. Pandora meant "the gift of all," because all the gods gave her gifts symbolic of their powers (e.g., ATHENA gave her feminine skills, APOLLO the talent to sing, and so on}. Zeus gave her a box, which she was not to open. […] In spite of the warnings of the gods, Pandora

opened the box Zeus had given her and all the sins and evils that have plagued mortals since sprang forth. By the time Pandora closed the lid of the box, only Hope was left within. (1979, p.149)

This dramatic poem seems to reach out for what is left in Pandora's Box: i.e. Hope. May be this is the reason why Pandora and her box are recalled. Before Hope is achieved, disaster, sadness, wars, and death were the dominant features. The male lover says:

كأني أرى "باندورا"

فأنظر صندوقها وأساه

واكتمال الفجيعة بين خطاه

سواد يلِف الدروب

جوىّ وحروب

أسىّ وعذاب

As if I see "Pandora'

And look at her box and its pain

And the completion of the disaster between its steps

Blackness envelops the roads

Sadness and wars

And death stretched over all doors

Heart-breaking and torture   (مقام حبيبي [*The Status of my Beloved*], 2006, p. 31)

This dramatic poem contains three figures: the female seer, the male lover, and the female lover (Khuzamah). The female figure has the same importance as the male figure, signifying the importance of both sexes. Najeh al-Ma'moury, in his book نون والقوس [*Noon and the Arch*] –"Noon" in Arabic language refers to the feminine pronouns-, depicts how the dramatic poem prorates male and female voices equally. Al-Ma'moury believes that there is an intentional overlapping between the male and female to form a "comeback of the primary mythical discourse" (2005, p. 59). The dramatic poem ends with the female lover singing the song of victory may be to indicate this kind of discourse:

يا صبايا "عمون"

خزامى أنا

أدور دروب المدينة ضارعة

هل رأيتن يوما حبيبي

Oh maidens of "Amoun"

I am Khuzama

I go through the roads of the city

Have you seen my beloved someday   (مقام حبيبي [*The Status of my Beloved*], 2006, p. 47}

Another example of Radhwan's employment of mythology is his poem " مهداة الى
أطفال فلسطين " ["Presented to the Children of Palestine"], which is a poem within the
collection entitled خطوط على لافتة الوطن [*Stripes on the Homeland's Signboard*]
published in *Shahqa min Ghubar: Al-'A'mal al-Shi'riya 1977-2001*[*A Sob* of Dust: *The
Complete Works 1977-2001*] (2001). This poem provides mythical figures that reflect the
misery of Palestinian children:

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أراك غريقا في بحر الجوع الأبدي،

أراك تعانق – أنكيدو-

تصرع عشتار،

وتضرع نحوك،

تضرع كل الآلهة الهرمة نحوك أن تخلق-

عشتار – لأجل الفقراء

</div>

　　　　I see you drowned in the sea of eternal hunger,

　　　　I see you hugging – Enkidu-

　　　　Knocking Ishtar down,

　　　　And towards you, entreat,

　　　　All frail gods entreat towards you asking you to create-

　　　　Ishtar- for the sake of the poor　　　　　　　　　(lines 10-15)

This poem deals with the sufferings of Palestinian people. Iman Mousa
Mawajdah, in her book عبد الله رضوان شاعرا [*Abdullah Radhwan as a Poet*], reads the
employment of mythology in these lines as symbolic aiming to implicate certain
meanings. She comments that the poet stands as a representative for the poor people due
to his awareness of their conditions, therefore "all gods are entreating asking for the
return of the goddess of fertility for the sake of the poor (2005, p. 135). The poet features
the state of social suffering faced by the Palestinian person, by employing the mythical
conflict between Ishtar and Gilgamesh. Shapiro and Hendricks introduce Ishtar as,

> A fertility and mother goddess who represented the planet Venus
> personified. Her symbol was a star. As the daughter of ANU, Ishtar was
> worshiped at URUK as the goddess of gentleness, love, and desire; as the
> daughter of SIN, the warlike side of her character was dominant. In her
> role as warrior, Ishtar rode into battle and sent the vanquished into the
> underworld, where her sister ERESHKIGAL reined [….] When
> GILGAMESH scorned her love, Ishtar took revenge by sending a bull
> against him. After ENKIDO saved Gilgamesh from the bull, the goddess
> struck him down with a fatal illness.　　　(1979, p. 95)

Mawajdah believes that Enkido in Radhwan's poem 'represents the new generation who
is rebellious against the values of the elders, and these values as implied in the text have failed
to rescue reality. But the elders –the previous generation- who produced the defeat insist on
having Ishtar back" (2005, p. 136). But Mawajdah thinks that the poet himself "sees Ishtar as
someone unable to carry the features of fertility and life. The revolution against her is a
revolution against the decayed values in which the fathers believed, because these values did not
lead them to success and victory" (ibid).

Radhwan not only reshapes myth for specific political and social ends necessitated by the present time, but also he employs it in his poetry as a dramatic representation of his deepest awareness of the inner meaning of human life. His poems show his appreciation of the collective and communal nature of myths, aiming at binding a nation or a tribe together in common universal activities. His reshaped myths express a profound sense of togetherness of feeling and of living, that become a dramatic factor transcending time, uniting the past of traditional modes of belief with the present of current values and reaching toward a future that is full of political and social aspirations.

Conclusion

To conclude, the chosen examples demonstrate how Radhwan's poetry exemplifies Jung's belief in literature, as a vital component in human civilization. Taking into consideration that Jung's "theories have expanded the horizons of literary interpretation for those critics concerned to use the tools of the mythological approach" (Guerin, 1992, p. 168), this study has highlighted Radhwan's application of mythology by its being concerned to seek out the mysterious elements that elicit dramatic reactions. It has shown that he has achieved what Philip Wheelwright introduces in *The Language of Poetry,* considering myth as "the expression of a profound sense of togetherness of feeling and of action and of wholeness of living" (1960, p. 11). This research has introduced examples of Radwan's poetry, establishing the significance of each myth he is using to examine its relationship to archetypes and archetypal patterns. These examples are by no means exhaustive, but represent some of the archetypal images that the reader encounters in his poems, provided that they necessarily function as archetypes that should be interpreted as such only if the total context of the work logically supports an archetypal reading**.**

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