



**Epitome : International Journal
of Multidisciplinary Research**

ISSN : 2395-6968

**THE COMING OF AGE OF WOMEN'S FICTION : EXAMINING THE
ARCHETYPE OF THE TRIPLE GODDESS IN
SORAYYA KHAN'S 'NOOR'**



Ashita Bandelu Dsouza

Dept. of English
Ahmednagar College
Ahmednagar

ABSTRACT

The present paper is an exploration of the possibility of the emergence of the triple goddess archetype in the novel Noor by Sorayya Khan as an application of feminist archetypal criticism. The analysis considers the archetypal narrative theories and the myth formation theories as proposed by Annis Pratt, Estella Lauter, Eric Gould and Claude Levi-Strauss. The significance of archetypal and myth-making theories to an understanding of the changes in contemporary women's fiction and literature in general is considered. A

brief analysis of the archetype in three other novels, Rainbow and the Covenant by Sarala Barnabas, Burnt Shadows by Kamila Shamsie, Book of Rachel by Esther David is also presented. Thus, the rationale for considering the emergence of the triple goddess archetype as a mythological node is put forth.

KEYWORDS

Sorayya Khan, Noor, Archetypal Criticism, Triple Goddess Archetype, Myth-making in women's fiction.

RESEARCH PAPER

A myth is a collective agreement about some aspect of the unknown. Estella Lauter in her book *Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century Women* says that women, as a collective group, are 're-envisioning our cultural mythology' in various media through their creative expressions. She observes that myths are 'an integral part of our apparatus for structuring our lives', 'an aspect of our capacity to reason' (Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*), an 'expanding contextual structure' that functions 'to close the gap between event and meaning' and 'engages a persistent existential crisis' (Eric Gould, *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature*). Estella Lauter suggests that the theories about myth as propounded by Claude Levi-Strauss and Eric Gould imply that myths are 'part of the dynamic of history', 'structures that evolve in relation to existential crises' and 'an ongoing process of constructing a livable world.' (Lauter, p.3). The first task for the critic is to identify the archetype.

Of the various reasons enlisted by Estella Lauter for myths taking shape: three are taken up for discussion here: 'the need to validate nonprocreative female creativity', 'the desire to survive without being devalued', 'the necessity to envision a new world in order to find one's rightful place'. She enlists ways in which these new myths are formed: 'Myths take shape sometimes in collision with other myths', 'sometimes within them' and 'sometimes with only tangential references to them'. When many individuals work along the same lines of a myth a cultural myth is formed.

The vision should be collective and coherent. The elements should be repetitive, occur often. The reasons for their frequency is explored, identified and explained. This would help to assess the 'coherence of a collective vision.' These repetitive images are interpreted in relation to ourselves and the world or the social context. When a transformation is noticed the interpretations are re-evaluated. Pratt and Lauter believe that the artists would be unaware of their part in the process while some artists may be conscious of the myth working in the work. It is not a story that is revealed but an 'image of relationships among orders of being' emerges. It is a 'stimulation to imagine a new way of being'. These interpretations and relationships are dynamic and contextual.

Annis Pratt in her book 'Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction' states that archetypal criticism is inductive and it concerns itself with things as they are. Archetypal narratives stem from crises and dilemmas that are presented and these are such that have existed for long periods of time. In the case studies of feminine archetypes Pratt says that 'feminine archetypes of selfhood have been lost from culture' and therefore, 'images and symbols appear as fragments in women's fiction'. According to her the symbolic structures in women's fiction present an 'ancient, unresolved tension between feminine power and powerlessness in the history of human culture' (Pratt, p.167). She observes that 'women's fiction could be read as a mutually illuminative or interrelated field of texts reflecting a preliterate repository of feminine archetypes, including three particularly important archetypal systems- the Demeter/ Kore and Ishtar/ Tammuz rebirth myths, Arthurian grail narratives, and the Craft of the Wise, or witchcraft...the principal archetypes that recur in women's fiction ...find counterparts in these three complexes of ritual and narrative which...perceive as archetypal repositories of uniquely feminine and androgynous import.' (Pratt, p.170)

Annis Pratt while looking into the archetypal patterns of the life phases of the woman, it depicts a circle rather than a linear evolution of the woman hero. She observed that there is a cyclic pattern that is, the older and transformed women heroes return to the status of the virgin. In the present selected analysis the image of the triple goddess comes to the fore as if bringing the three energies together and uniting the feminine generations. The individual is rescued from her isolation and restored to wholeness. 'the mothers and daughters in women's

fiction seem also to be enacting the various aspects of the triple goddess, who was virgin, maternal figure and old woman at one and the same time.'

The present paper explores the possibility of a fragmented yet poignant presence of a triple goddess archetype emerging in the narrative of Sorayya Khan's novel *Noor*. *Noor* is a story located in the aftermath of the Pakistan Bangladesh war. The character Ali was sent as an officer to then East Pakistan to snub out the Bangladeshi nationalist freedom movements. Initially he went with pride about fighting for his country but when he reached the land of Dhaka, he began to be disillusioned about the glory of war. He witnessed the gruesome horrors of war that were not limited to a battlefield or soldiers of the enemy camp. The war crimes he was made witness to and also participant involved inhuman torture, rapes, cruelty, random mass murders of innocents including children and the like. Ali finally returned to Pakistan but brought along with him an orphan child, a victim of war, who he adopted as his daughter. He maintained silence regarding his experience in war and tried to repress those memories. He and his mother Nanijaan cared for Sajida with great love. Sajida grew without any memories of the wartime. Her only memories were those of the loss of her family in the cyclone a year before the war. She had lost her baby brother who had been entrusted in her care to the flood waters and had forgotten his name. She grew up, was married and gave birth to Noor, a mentally retarded and abnormal child. Noor though unable to speak or develop in the way of normal children had an uncanny gift of painting. She could bring up such images in her paintings that were long kept secrets by the members of her family.

Even though Ali had tried to repress all the memories of war, he still felt very guilty about what he had seen and done. Certain events, sights and sounds in normal life would trigger some aspects of his memory and thus he was continually haunted by the memories of war. Noor's paintings started to bring in Sajida's memories of the cyclone and Ali's memories of the war. However, Ali never spoke out about them.

Ali confesses that the glory of war ended for him the moment he stepped on the soil of Dhaka because, he says, 'In the end, he'd fought and killed for an unremarkable reason: to save himself.'(Khan, p.167)

At a certain point of time in the narrative, Noor came of age, and with her first menses was initiated into the category of 'woman'. Thus, the narrative now held three women characters in its weave, Nanijaan, the elderly woman, Sajida, the middle aged woman and Noor, the young maiden. Noor then painted a pink red river with a grey bank. It reminded Ali of a river, Sithyalakha, on the banks of which he had buried a woman who had died of wounds of torture. It also reminded Sajida of a river she had seen as a child that was full of bloated dead bodies. This memory initiated a conversation between Nanijaan and Sajida while Sajida was washing Nanijaan's hair. As they were contemplating about the dead bodies and Sajida was wondering whether they were bodies of those dead in the cyclone, Noor appeared and chimed a nonsensical jingle about 'birds of a feather, flock together, hands tied together, ...' This helped Sajida and Nanijaan understand that the floating dead bodies were that of the war victims. These discussions prompted Nanijaan to confront and question Ali regarding his role in the war regarding what he had seen and what he had done. The confrontations and confessions that ensued led to conversations about the war between Ali, Nanijaan and Sajida. It was the first time in years that Ali was able to confess the thoughts that he had suppressed.

These discussions further paved the way for the paintings by Noor that followed. The narrative culminates with a painting of young Ali as an officer standing with his troops after completing the work of a huge mass grave. As Ali related the events of that fateful day he told Sajida that as he was helping his troops dig the mass grave for the pile of Bangladeshi war victims' bodies in the pouring rain, he told her that they had orders to shoot any Bangladeshi they see. So, when Ali was digging the pit, he had shot at a group of

Bangladeshis that had approached the pit. He remembers a girl around the age of five who fell into the pit and was splashing into the wet mud searching for someone named Mukhtiar among the dead bodies. He believed he had killed her and could not rescue her though she was within his reach. He had been feeling guilty about this act more than all the other crimes that he had witnessed and participated in. However, the name Mukhtiar brought back Sajida's memories, that she was the five year old girl and Mukhtiar was the name of the baby brother she had lost in the cyclone. She told Ali that relief workers had rescued her from the pit after which Ali had brought her to Pakistan and adopted her as his daughter. This was a very important message for Ali because he had always been guilty of his crime and by adopting he had been trying to atone it.

"Ali, her father, might once have lifted his rifle and blindly aimed in a torrent of rain and rising waves of heated fog- and shot her dead." (Khan, p.200) The realization of the danger and futility of the anonymity of war.

Thus, through these events, the novel brings out the theme of the futility of war and the horror of the anonymity of war.

In order to justify the reflection of the triple goddess archetype in the narrative in the parallel characters of Nanijaan, Sajida and Noor, the following aspects put forth by Annis Pratt and Estella Lauter have been considered.

Thus, as propounded by Annis Pratt, the archetype would emerge in women's fiction to present a dilemma, that would be related to female power and powerlessness. As according to Mary Daly's hypothesis that women live of the boundaries of two cultures, the dominant and the muted, the women characters Nanijaan here play the role of the muted culture, being powerless, Nanijaan, powerless to stop Ali from going to war even when she knew it was wrong, Sajida being a helpless victim of war and Noor unable to voice out what she knew of. The archetype comes at the time where the power of the woman can be revealed. The power and responsibility of the woman to stop wars. As comes through from the conversation between Sajida and Nanijaan. The action of confronting and confessing that leads to introspection and realisation of responsibility comes through after the hazy appearance of this archetype. Just as Ali is made to confront and confess his role in the war, the archetype is asking the woman to confront herself and take responsibility for not stopping the war.

Annis Pratt has used certain steps to ascertain the archetype: Identify the dilemma; identify the symbols used to project aspects of this dilemma; identify the role proffered to the women in the particular context and find its interpretation.

According to Estella Lauter the process of myth making starts with a tendency to form mental images in relation to repeated experiences. These mental images when manifested are archetypal images. A similar manifestation of such a triple goddess has been identified in at least three other works by contemporary writers by the researcher in *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie, *Book of Rachel* by Esther David and *Rainbow and the Covenant* by Sarala Barnabas. These novels also have war and religio-political aspects that segregated families and friends. The emergence of the triple goddess in the form of three women characters belonging to three different age groups that initiate conversations and confrontations can be observed in their narratives also.

The women characters in these examples exist throughout the narratives and they have different times of entries and exits in the narrative. However, the point in narrative when they come together, they bring with them a potent energy that drives the narrative towards its theme. They address the dilemma as Pratt states an archetype would address as in these cases the dilemma of locating the women's power and powerlessness in the social contexts of the narrative.

If the experience is powerful they become mythic if they are widely shared. In the study of myths in process, the repeated image is very important. The first step according to

Estella Lauter is that we redefine the archetype as a tendency to form images in relation to recurrent experiences. We need to uncover enough images created by women to discover the patterns in our experiences. The patterns are recurrent in these cases as the social contexts are similar. The narratives have a woman protagonist. In the case of *Burnt Shadows* the protagonist Hiroko Tanaka is the victim of the atom bomb in Nagasaki. She loses her lover, her husband, her own son to the effects of hatred perpetrated in the name of nationalism and communalism further intensified by mistaken identities and the anonymity of war. However, the dilemma is about how the woman could have any power to make amends or repair the loss or even stop the spread of such hatred. The characters emerging in the triple goddess archetype bring out the need to be responsible and accountable for every life. In the case of *Book of Rachel*, the protagonist Rachel Dandekar a Jewish Indian elderly woman refuses to leave India in response to the Aliyah, the holy call to all Jews to return to Israel, because she feels that India is her holy land as it had given her ancestors shelter when they were shipwrecked during their escape from religious and communal persecution. As a majority of Jews migrate, the synagogue that she dearly loves was going to be sold and demolished by commercial land sharks. She is helpless and alone but tries a variety of ways to save the synagogue as she believes it is the heritage of India. The triple goddess archetype emerges in the narrative with her daughter and the wife of the land shark coming to help her. The context is the powerlessness of the woman who had no voice in her household. However, the three women gain strength from their relation with each other and find ways to successfully save the synagogue. In *Rainbow and the Covenant* by Sarala Barnabas, the character Ruksana had been through a rough marriage and was fighting her way in life with grief. The appearance of the girl child Priya and her relation with Ruksana opens up a ray of hope for a renewed family for Ruksana, but mistaken identities, and misogynist vindictiveness makes it difficult for her to see any hope. The coming together of the triple goddess archetype in the form of Ruksana's mother and Priya in the narrative brings in the energy required for clearing up of the debris in Ruksana's life.

The second step of understanding the archetype is to look at myth as a structure for dealing with shared crises of self-definition in the face of the unknown. It needs to redefine the unconscious as the unknown within us. Mythological nodes of female experience can be identified by locating images that seem unfamiliar in patriarchal usage. Their pertinence to female experience can be affirmed when we find them repeated independently in works by other women. Rachel, Rachel's daughter, Mrs Chinoy in *Book of Rachel*; Ruksana, Rahel and Priya in *Rainbow and the Covenant*, Hiroko, Elizabeth and Kim in *Burnt Shadows* and Nanijaan, Sajida and Noor in *Noor*, face a shared crises of self-definition in opposition to the roles proffered to them in their social context. The intensity and the context for each one of them is different, however, it is a situation peculiar to the women of that social context. Thus, the appearance of the triple goddess archetype where these triads of women of the peculiar three age groups coming together to renew each other and with their potent energy through discussions, conversations, and the like bring about a turn of events in the narrative that addresses the theme of the context is a peculiar pattern. Therefore, this appearance of the triple goddess could be considered as a mythological node of female experience.

Estella Lauter suggests that the new myth taking shape would then take the form of stories and become symbols in language and begin to influence the experience of others. Claude Levi-Strauss says that once a mythic story is identified the 'bundles of relations' among elements can be examined. At such a point, the myth will appear in the literary forms in societal conventions. These language systems would offer alternative models for incorporating, storing and conveying information. Therefore, the critic needs to become conscious of the acts of mythmaking and to establish viable relationships with the myths that result from them. Thus, this could be an avenue to explore in the way the twentieth century

women have participated in this myth making process and what were the concerns in their particular social context?

Many women writers are themselves subservient to gender norms internalized as their own values, but often unconsciously they have developed modes of communicating feminist messages. As a result, much of women's fiction constitutes a "vibration" available only to the consciousness of those men and women already at odds with the strictures of gender.

Women novelists have warned us with tales of patriarchal horror. Encouraged us with stories of heroes undertaking quests that we may emulate. They have given us maps of the patriarchal battlefield and of the landscape of our ruined culture. They have resurrected for our use codes and symbols of our potential power. They have provided us moments of epiphany when we can feel rising from our depths a quality that altogether transcends the gender polarities destructive to human life. They have given back the goddess her beauty, her power and her beneficence. They have made the woman's novel a pathway to the authentic self, to the roots of our selves beneath consciousness of self, and to our innermost being.

A feminist archetypal theory could help us establish an alternative mind-set that will allow us to move behind our cultural stage into the wings of female experience, examine the relation of women to myth.

REFERENCES

- Ardener, Edwin. "The 'Problem' Revisited" in *Perceiving Women* ed. Shirley Ardener. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*. 1962.
- Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. 1973.
- Gould, Eric. *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature*. Princeton University Press, 1981.
- Khan, Sorayya. *Noor*. The Publishing Laboratory, University of North Carolina Wilmington. 2006.
- Lauter, Estella. *Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century Women*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington. 1984.
- Pratt, Annis. *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington. 1981.