

Life cycle of a mythical superhero from a cognitive point of view

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Abstract

The following essay means to compare and contrast two superheroes, *Esfandiar* from *Shah Name* by *Firdausi* and *Achilles* from *Iliad* by *Homer*. The main purpose behind making this choice is that primarily these two represent very famous and tangible examples from the world of myths. Furthermore, they can be good models for indicating the culture and beliefs of Persian and Greek people, which can be traced back in a holistic worldview about myths in general. This paper aims to show how an epic writer creates and at last destroys a typical super hero.

The highlighted points in this study are; 1) the reason why they are given physical flaws, while they are considered much mightier than other ordinary human beings, and 2) why they are created in such an exaggerated way and then they are killed. The first result of this paper will point to the fact that they are bound to these flaws to be made digestible for human being's cognition. The second conclusion is related to the fact that they will die, because the epic writer tries to convey a metaphorical message. He shows that although the balance of nature (the accepted cognitive perceptions) is apparently violated at first, but eventually, mother of nature takes control and reshapes everything back into normal even if the process takes some extreme measures such as killing and destroying some super powerful human.

Keywords: Cognitive linguistics, death of the author, deconstruction, comparative mythology, logos

1. Introduction

When we hear the word myth, our first impression refers to fictional old stories. However, they are considered rich sources for inspecting the human's worldview and cognition. In the vast world of literature, it is possible to explain many things through myths, without feeling the need of clarification for everything from a scientific point of view. Sometimes we are obliged to define things that were created many years before our scientific findings. Myth writers meant to create a world that was somehow ahead of its primitive time, meaning the offered phenomena in myths could not be possibly explain by the basic knowledge of the time. Since expressing myths can only be

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possible by using language tools, it is claimed that mythic language is very complicated and consists of intertwined inner and outer layers. The outer layer is to some extent arbitrary language, with all of the features and properties of ordinary human language, including the substance and form, which is always used to create a story. However, the inner layers of mythical language contains a very complicated perception, beyond the scope of mortal perception and intellectual reasoning, a cognitive phenomenon that is prior to language recognition and can be called "logos" (Clarkson, 2005).

In this regards, comparative mythology is based on some hypotheses regarding the existence of a universal inner layer of mythical language. The language of myths, after being compared internationally; surprisingly hands in some common internal points. That is why it might be possible to claim that these similarities might lead us to generalize not only the writers but also the audience that the myth is created for.

Cognition is considered a sub branch of psychology, which can help us to clarify this heroic life cycle and answer our questions. In this paper there will be a survey based on tracing the reasons and logics behind the life cycle of a mythological hero inside the domain of man's general cognition. This is what mostly known as comparative mythology and its purpose is to discover historical links between mythical systems and to clarify the developments of myths and legends throughout the time. The pattern in mythology is considered repetitious for different authors from different parts of the world during the passage of time.

A brief history of cognitive linguistics

Cognitive linguistics is a modern school in linguistics, initiated in 1970s, in the results of insufficiency of formal approaches to language (Ungerer and Schmid, 2006). Its root can be traced back in cognitive sciences in the 1960s and 1970s; especially those areas related to human categorization of former traditions such as Gestalt psychology. Number of researches in this area rose dramatically by the early 1990s and it was at this time that the scholars started to call themselves "cognitive linguists". Since it was not a particular theory, cognitive linguistics was known as a movement. As a matter of a fact, a framework leads theories, assumptions, and principles regardless of the fact that they are complementary, overlapping, and sometimes competing. The development of cognitive linguistics from 1980 onward was a result of cognitive psychological theories of prototype categorization. Before this, there was a dominant checklist of categories, while then other areas such as morphology, syntax, and phonology were permeated.

Talmy (2006, p: 9) indicated that there is a branch of cognitive linguistics called attentional system of language. It is a subcategory of cognitive semantics; in a speech situation, the listener might pay attention to the linguistic expression along with the context at hand and the conceptual content represented. However, he/she might not get all of these materials at once. Each of them might have a different degree of salience. These differences in degrees of salience are mostly due to extrinsic systematicity of language rather than intrinsic factors. This must be the case with myths, the underlying meaning, and the common points between different nation's myths, which is possibly, because extrinsic saliency is the dominant power in this trend.

The reason behind creating a hero and destroying it eventually

As it is mentioned by Jung, "our feelings and perceptions exist only because we have the ability to produce an image of them". This leads us to the fact that we are following a strict set of rules that no matter how wide the range of human imagination is, again, as Jung himself calls it, there is a bigger range of limitation called "collective unconsciousness". This term refers to all the concepts that are in common between all the nations, regardless of the fact that whether they have been in touch with each other or not. We as human beings are so affected by the aforementioned limitations of our mind, i.e. our cognition, that we call any unknown phenomenon "the unconscious" Carl Jung (1960, p: 479).

In order to compensate for this lost or restriction we develop hundreds of facts that are beyond our power to survey. We cannot be invulnerable, so we create such a creature in our art or literature- the only trends that give us the possibility to do so- in order to make up for our physical limitations. We fulfil our wildest dreams via these heroes. Some of them are ideal and some are depicted along with some physical or mental flaws. The reason for creating such a contradiction between complete and incomplete heroes is;

First, creating many takes the uniqueness away. That is, if we have too many heroes their powers become less affective in the eyes of a reader and they will not remain immortal in the literature. The thing that immortalizes a hero is the spiritual journey that he goes through. However, about the contradiction, it must be mentioned that one hero's flaw is another hero's privilege. If one of them is depicted as a selfish character, the other is -like it or not-

perceived to be selfless. Such is the case in the human society between ordinary people. In addition, as the final point it is worthy to mention that an earthly flaw humanizes the idealized character and because of it, the audience can identify themselves with him much easier.

The process of creating a super hero

To start with, we need to take a quick look at how the discussed heroes were created in the first place. Achilles was born from a fairy mother and a human father. His mother tried to immortalize him through a special set of rituals, but unfortunately, as she was performing the part in which she was supposed to drench him in the holy water, she forgot to drench his heels from which, she was holding him during the process. He grew up to become one of the greatest Greek warriors of all times. However, his invulnerability was limited as pointed out. His biggest thirst was for glory and honour. He did not fear the gods; he did not respect kings, and his biggest concern was his reputation.

On the other hand, Isfandiar was the son of a human father who was promised by Zoroaster- his prophet- to get four gifts, among which was immortality. However, the prophet gave these gifts to his four sons and immortality was granted to Isfandiar. Just as the other hero's case, during the process of immortalization, fate helped death to find his way to Isfandiar's destiny and baby Isfandiar closed his eyes while he was held inside the holy water. Therefore, his weak point became his eyes. He, as well, became a great Persian warrior and he was so arrogant but one of his biggest traits was his humble devotion toward his religion.

After the over view of the stories we can seek some cognitive features in their life cycle. The idea of immortalization is the first step that the writer takes toward creating a supernatural hero, but as soon as we read about it, we are informed about the flaw. Therefore, the cognition is totally in control here; the balance between vulnerability and invulnerability paves the way for a more realistic view of the myth. They gain a lot of courage because of their gifts; however, they are expected to face death like any ordinary human being. Therefore, there is a supernatural manner of creation and a natural manner of ending their lives.

A hero reflects his nationality

In order to immortalize a hero, the native author has to make his epic as national as possible. As it was mentioned above, this is one of those inner layers that make a myth so special. A great part of every member of a specific society's cognition is formed throughout growing up in that society and committing to the national and social norms. A reader needs to be exposed to some folk features in order to be able to accept the hero as a role model, while the superficial dimension of the hero is also a matter of consideration.

The two heroes are not the most virtues, humble or obedient men. This is another method that authors follow to make the heroes as mortal as possible. The heroes are told that if they go to their last battle they will die. Achilles' father tells him that the first man who sets foot on the Trojan shore will definitely die in this war, as Isfandiar's mother tells him before starting his trip to face Rostam (the great hero of Shahname) that he shall not remain alive in case he starts this battle. The first thing that should be considered here is their arrogance. Achilles seeks eternal glory in any cost and Isfandiar seeks his father's throne. We can see that their primary motives are not as humble as one expects from a role model. After going through some ethical labours they are humanized which makes their newly gained traits even more valuable; as they were not virtues from the beginning but they gained virtue. Isfandiar is humanized right after getting an arrow in his eyes (his weak spot), so that could be considered what has been keeping him inhumane. As he turns human before his death, he starts seeing the world clearly and repents for his sins, while Achilles is humanized after killing Hector, so revenge is what purifies him.

The deeper level, as Jacques Derrida puts it, falls in an external system of meaning given to them from outside. He calls this theory in terms of deconstruction in *Of Grammatology* (1969). He proposes when language is understood as writing, it is realized that meaning does not originate in the *logos* or thought of the language user. Instead, individual language users use an external system of signs, a system that exists separately to them because these signs are written down. The meaning of language does not originate in the thoughts of the individual language user because those thoughts are already taking place in a language that does not originate with them. The meaning of a text is not neatly determined by authorial intention and cannot be unproblematically recreated by a reader. Meaning necessarily involves some degree of interpretation, negotiation, or translation. This necessity for the active interpretation of meaning by readers, when language is understood as writing, is why deconstruction takes place.

About the religious attitude it is worthy to mention that the first thing to be noticed about Isfandiar as a hero is his obedience from Zoroaster and the fact that he wins his first battle to spread the prophet's words. However, Achilles is not afraid of gods and he does not pay attention to the messages sent by gods. He is so sure of his fate that does not seek to change it in any way. The reason for their revengeful feelings is also related to the fact that Isfandiar wants to defend his religion first, and afterwards, his feeling is strengthened because Rostam's allays kill his son, while Achilles is only motivated to avenge his friend who was killed by Hector without a previous purpose. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that the Persian poet does not have to provide his audience with necessarily concrete features. He can justify his plot mostly by allocating the events to some kind of supernatural powers, or an unknown exotic force, while the Greek writer has to provide as many concrete evidences as he can, since his audience is mostly satisfied through events and reasons that are possible to be experienced in the real world. This can be a consequence of the difference between the eastern and western worldview about religion; in east, the worshiped God or ancient goddesses are so exotic and unquestionable that their followers find it enough just to hear about their greatness. Therefore, they are not that much in need of physical evidence. On the other hand, the westerners' attitude toward their worshiped one is completely metaphysical; they expect tangible and concrete evidence in order to start believing in something.

A worthy to mention difference is the idea of individual rights. In the ancient Greek, people believed in the fact that governments were there to serve the individuals and their rights are to be respected in every trend. In this regards, we see that when Agamemnon tries to contempt Achilles by taking his war gift away, the great warrior retreats from the battle in order to show his objection to being insulted, knowing that he is disobeying the king. While the attitude of the Persian hero, even when he finds out about his king's evil intention, does not change. This is because individuals are never superior to the authorities in this culture.

Nevertheless, a question remains not answered. What do those common features represent? As it was pointed out before, those common features can also be considered as another inner layer of myths. Human realization of the overall trends in myths, which is the same for most nations, regardless of their connections, and whether there were any.

When we encounter such characteristics of myths; the ones that are in common between most of them, we are reminded of the interesting theory offered by "Roland Barthes" known as "the death of the author". Barthes (1977) suggests that we should not restrict a passage to the author's identity - his or her political views, historical context, religion, ethnicity, psychology, or other biographical or personal attributes - to distil meaning from the author's work. He proposes, "To give a text an author", and assign a single, corresponding interpretation to it, "is to impose a limit on that text". It is true that we should chase the cultural roots of different issues but culture is much wider a trend than the point of view of the writer.

The idea of sacrifice

Heroes are respected because of the role they play in our cognition related to the ideal human beings. They need to act in such a way that we could consider them role models, so they have to attribute to human values in extreme manners. Sacrifice is meant to be a loss, as Carl Jung (1960) calls it, "so that one makes sure that the egoistic claim is not there anymore". Therefore, the gift should be donated in a manner that it is no longer in the owner's possession. However, you may look at it from another perspective and say a person who is sacrificing himself, proves his own possession; i.e. you cannot give away something you do not own. Heroes follow such a path in different ways, but the point is he has prevailed on his soul in such an effective manner that makes the author give him a quite dramatic ending to be engraved in the reader's mind.

The two above mentioned heroes follow their quest just as Jung again in the aforementioned book, *Psychology and religion* (1960, pp: 256-57) has drawn the pattern; they are told that if they go to their last battle they will not comeback alive. Knowing that their first motive is personal glory, which makes it sound pretty selfish, but after a while they change their point of view and each finds his own firmly placed reason: the Greek hero seeks revenge for his friend, and the Persian hero wants to avenge the death of his son.

Revenge is a very powerful human motive and as someone is going to sacrifice his greatest possession, i.e., his life, then there should be a convincing reason for it, so that, the reader is able to somehow identify himself with the hero, which is the most important aim of the epic writer.

Sacrifice can also be the outcome of autonomy and consciousness meaning the hero is free to use his God given gifts, but the problem with a hundred percent "ideal" hero is that they go on and on down the road of cliché, just giving away their belongings for any cause. However, Achilles and Isfandiar are not included in this category; throughout their quest, they choose to be disobedient toward their superiors, selfish and reckless which are not the

traits you expect to find in an ideal hero. What makes them so special is the fact that through their free will they reach the opposite of the above-mentioned characteristics. It can be concluded that it is not just the fact that they are made less god-like because of their physical flaws, but they are also humanized after making some wrong choices in order to prove the existence of free will.

The role of religion

In the mythological world, which always dates back to ancient times, religion always plays a crucial role in the whole process. Religion used to be the one base that answered all the human questions and that could be used to justify almost everything. Creating a hero is not excluded from this rule. Since people in ancient days were so bound to their accepted religious ideas, any epic writer had to find a way in order to include these beliefs inside his plot, or even proceeds with the plot via them. These beliefs were in different levels of importance and they were a good help for the reader in order to get a gist of the logic behind the events of the story.

There is an interesting opposition between the eastern and western way of looking at the matter of religion. As he follows their distinctive philosophies, the eastern writer does not care for too much concrete evidences. It is enough to mention God's will as the reason for the events, while the western writer's audiences, just as Karl Jung in *Psychology and religion* (1960, p: 476) points out, need more psychological evidence or grounded in metaphysical presence in order to be able to digest the whole thing. A good example for this fact can be detected from the manner through which Achilles and Isfandiar get their flaws during the process of immortalization. Achilles' heel remains vulnerable because his mother is holding him from that spot and as his father interrupts, she cannot go on with the process completely. Totally, a human's fault leads to this flaw in Achilles' fate. Looking at the same event in the Persian myth, you can see that while Zoroaster is performing the immortalization ritual, fate helps death and together they make Isfandiar close his eyes, so that it remains his weak spot.

It is interesting to note that again the God's will is the thing that leaves Isfandiar's fate in Rostam's hands, but Achilles changes his own attitude because he finds out that revenge does not bring his friend back. As it appears the Persian writer finds fate and God's will enough in order to convince the audience about the process of humanizing the hero, but the Greek writer has to create the change before the end so that the reader finds sufficient evidence to cope with the given reasons.

The manner through which Isfandiar remembers God is different from Achilles. The Persian author has to contain some quality religious traits in his hero so that he finds the eventual respect that he is meant to. If you go through *Shahname*, you can see that Isfandiar has many soliloquies praying and asking God for help and forgiveness but Achilles only mentions gods when he needs some force to revenge the disrespectful behavior of the king toward himself. Homer is not obliged to follow a religious restriction in order to persuade the audience to respect his hero, while Firdousi has to pass his hero from a religious passage.

The reason behind creating and killing a hero

Our worldly experience tells us that we are born some day, go on with our life, and eventually die. If this is what our cognition tells us then we expect any living creature to face the same end. Now, as it has been quite feasible throughout this essay, the Greek and Persian hero were meant to turn to immortal men, but due to some circumstances, it did not happen to them. In order to explain the author's choice of such a tangible reason for this creation and then destruction of the hero we can turn back to the fact that we as audiences need to cope with any phenomenon- as unusual as it might sound- via the check point of our cognition. It governs everything that needs to be accepted by our logic; a hero is one of those phenomena that no matter how imaginary it might be depicted, it needs to be included in the domain of these pre-defined rules.

Conclusion

In the ancient times, when the dominant power was allocated to the mother of nature, people used to think that she never loses its ultimate balance, even though some of the rules might be violated by some major parts of nature itself. One could eventually see that the prevailed power of the "supernatural" nature gets everything back to normal, and it happens at any cost even if that price is to kill some living beings.

After a while, man started creating different versions of religion and allocated every indefinable phenomenon to the worshiped force. At the dawn of the age of technology and science, man began feeling the need to explain anything via logic and science. Our modern world bounds us to definitions, formulae, and fixed rules but the truth is that they will not allow the power of imagination to fly as high and as productive as it used to. Now, if you want to move between the lines of science, you cannot persuade the reader to distinguish himself with your newly created

model, because we as humans were not created knowing all these boundaries. They are as abstract as the ancient religious beliefs. Their only difference according to their attitude toward literature is that they deform the beautiful way that literature is trying to change our life. In case of heroes, again, we still can identify ourselves with them, although we are modern men. This is another case of repelling the scientific worldview; we do not need formulae to seek a reason for creating a hero. Man always flies high through his imagination and this leads him to stay as humane and as independent from other creatures as possible.

To sum up, a hero is created to show that even though a man might reach his greatest potentials in one phase, he might need help in some other. Even in our wildest tries- in corporation with literature-, we do not need to create a hundred percent perfect man. The endeavor must be in a way that in the first place, makes him as believable as possible, in the domain of our cognition, which might have been searched for with different names during the years, so that the reader can identify himself with the created icon. But the role of nature is what remains loop-like; it gives and takes back different things in different ways, while the start and the end is always determined ahead and the differentiation can be traced in the manner of moving through this path.

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