

The Secret of Seasons. A Comparative Study of Farrokhzad's “Iman Biavarim be Aqaz-e Fasl-e Sard” and Demeter-Persephone Myth

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Abstract

In Greek mythology, the abduction of Persephone, daughter of Demeter, by Hades—the deity presiding over the underworld—and her traffic between the world of the living and the underworld, explains the concept of seasons as well as informative beliefs regarding fertility, mortality, and resurrection procedures. Demeter, the fertility deity of earth, animals, and humans, ceases fertility when she rages after the abduction of her daughter. In the poem “Iman biavarim be aghaz-e fasl-e sard,” there is a strong intertextuality with the myths of Demeter and Persephone. The main objective of this research is to find the various aspects of this intertextuality and then present the problem of how and for what purpose Farrokhzad, through this textuality of death and rebirth—and in general, the world she lived in—exposes the form of this myth. Initially, the mentioned indications of Farrokhzad are assessed by the framework of intertextuality theory, and attempts are made to discover connections and then indicate the strong intertextuality of these signs with Demeter and Persephone. The results show that Farrokhzad nourishes themes like fertility cessation, human rebirth, and the phytomorphism of humans.

Keywords: “Comparative literature”, “Intertextuality”, “Forough Farrokhzad”, “Myths of fertility”, “Demeter and Persephone Myth”, “Death and rebirth”

Introduction

Although myths and legends belong to bygone eras, their themes can arise from any point in history. Many literary works and films in recent decades have included numerous references to, and even adaptations of, mythological stories. According to Malinowski's perspective, "a myth plays a central role not only in traditional cultures but in all cultures. He views a myth as the origin of procedures and social relations, and a key element in people's ideology." [1] It is important to note that myths are not confined to any particular nation or tribe: "Frazer also believes that it is possible to compare cultures with each other because the primary human impulse for myth-making is the same everywhere." [2] Myths can manifest in various forms in contemporary texts, sometimes through direct references to myths, by invoking cultures, or by recalling themes and content. Since myths reflect the fundamental beliefs of human society, they possess the capacity to serve as universal patterns to which we can return. Authors use them as foundational passages. The presence of myths in the works of future authors has an intertextual nature. "A myth, being pre-existing and pre-generated, can command a novel as a hypotext." [3] Hassanzadeh believes that Bakhtin, followed by Kristeva, articulated the relationship between a novel and a myth in terms of dialogic and intertextuality theories. Although this research focuses on a poem by Farrokhzad, the essence of the narrative remains unchanged.

In Farrokhzad's work, signs that reflect the poet's environment are prevalent. She portrays herself as a harbinger of spring, her beloved as a domineering and powerful figure, and her world as one where fertility has ceased, leaving a void. These elements are prominent mythical patterns, or mythemes, of Demeter and Persephone. Mythemes are recurring motifs in mythical narratives. If we consider a myth's story akin to music, then mythemes are its notes [4]. In the case of Demeter and Persephone, we can imagine the following mythemes: Persephone's abduction by Hades, Demeter's anguish over losing her daughter, the cessation of fertility, the violation of Persephone by Hades, Demeter's search for Persephone, Persephone's consumption of pomegranate seeds in the underworld, and the division of the year into summer and winter seasons.

The myth of Demeter and Persephone is a cyclical narrative that elucidates the cycle of seasons. After Persephone consumes pomegranate seeds in the underworld, she is permitted to reside on Earth for only half of the year, while the other half must be spent in the underworld. During the six months when Demeter is reunited with her daughter, water flows, animals and humans are fertile, and crops flourish. However, during the other half of the year, Demeter's grief over her separation from Persephone halts fertility. In contemporary times, amidst the rise of feminist studies and critiques of patriarchal culture, the myth of Demeter and Persephone has garnered significant scholarly attention. Donovan, in his book "After the Fall," has evaluated the myth's influence on the works of three English-language poets and authors: Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow [5]. Downing's "The Long Journey Home" explores themes such as the return to the mother, maternal and filial secrets, and feminist perspectives, in addition to providing an introduction to the Greek origins of myths [6]. Mary Kay has examined various facets of Demeter and Persephone in three contemporary narratives by authors Lynn Freed, Joanne Harris, and Meredith Ann Pierce [7]. Furthermore, Radford has conducted a comparative analysis of Victorian poets, including Hardy, Webb, and Forster, with the myth of Demeter and Persephone [8]. Additionally, Hassanzadeh Dastjerdi in Iran has compared Belgheis Soleimani's novel "Be Hades Khosh Amadid" with the Persephone myth within the framework of intertextuality theory [3].

Fraser posits that "fertility myths form the foundation of all mythical systems." [9] Farrokhzad, as one of the most prominent figures in recent decades, establishes strong intertextuality with the myths of Demeter and Persephone in some of her works. Numerous researchers have dedicated their studies to comparative analyses between Farrokhzad's works and those of other poets. Bagheri and Baghaei drew parallels between Emily Dickinson's life and poetry and the life and works of Farrokhzad [10] [11]. Akbar Beiragh explored the similarities between Forough Farrokhzad's life and works with those of the 20th-century English poet Sylvia Plath [12]. Tahmasebi and Taheri examined the deconstruction of patriarchal myths in some of Forough Farrokhzad's poems [13], while Vaghe'e Dashti assessed the comparative myths in the poetry of Farrokhzad and T. S. Eliot [14]. In English literature, Jamali analyzed the concepts of death and rebirth in "Ariel" by Plath and "Tavallodi Digar" by Farrokhzad [15]. Furthermore, Mohammad Hossein and Zaheri Birgani conducted a comparative study of four components—love, death, rebirth, and patriarchy—in selected poems by Plath and Farrokhzad [16]. Despite this extensive research, there has been no study on the intertextuality between the myths of Demeter and Persephone and Farrokhzad's poems. The current research attempts

to fill this gap. Farrokhzad portrays herself as the mother of Earth and a figure of fertility power through repeated references, thereby creating a complex system of meanings about death and rebirth concerning the myth, that this study addresses.

Theoretical framework

Since the realization of the intertextuality theory by Kristeva, which originated from Bakhtin's theory, intertextuality remains one of the most practical frameworks alongside the parallelism method in comparative literature studies. This theory emphasizes that every text incorporates elements of other texts. In other words, "every text is an absorption and metamorphosis of other texts." [17] Bakhtin was the first to propose the general idea of this perspective.

Bakhtin posited that every text encompasses two dimensions: the intratextual and the metatextual. The concept of intertextuality pertains to the relationships and substructures within texts. "However, every text is also connected to its cultural, social, and political context, as well as to preceding texts, from which it derives a portion of its meaning." [3] Gino concurs with Bakhtin's view that "dialogism continually links the text to its context, its author, and the preceding authors," as defined by Bakhtin (Namvarmotalaq, 1387: 399, cited by Gino). [18] Furthermore, Eco, in the Postscript to "The Name of the Rose," declares: "I found what writers have always known and have continually reminded us: books always speak about other books, and every story is a tale that has been told before." [19] Hence, texts are influenced not only by the real world but also by each other. Literary techniques such as Talmih, Tazmin, and Esteqbal in Persian literature are evidence of such relationships between texts.

In the late 1960s, Kristeva elucidated the theory of intertextuality by synthesizing the views of Saussure, Bakhtin, and Barthes on the nature and essence of language, as well as the implications of semiotic systems. Saussure's three principles—the arbitrariness of the relationship between the signifier and the signified within a sign, the non-referential nature of linguistic communication, and the relational foundation of meanings in language [20]—affirm that linguistic communication cannot exist without structure. Barthes posits that the author's role is that of a collector or utilizer of existing information. Bakhtin, who regards every text as an amalgamation of quotations, further supports this notion. At the core of Kristeva's framework is the belief that writers act more as editors than creators of original texts. She posits that a text is "a permutation of various texts, an intertextual entity within its own space," where "multiple expressions, derived from other texts, intertwine and neutralize one another." [22] Consequently, the meaning of each text is only complete in relation to other texts. Whether consciously or unconsciously, overtly or covertly, writers incorporate elements of other texts into their work. The term 'synchronic intertextuality' refers to the relationship between texts and the real world, including contemporary texts, while 'diachronic intertextuality' describes the connection between texts and those from the past.

In the realm of intertextual relations, the concept of influence is often paramount. Many texts draw inspiration from others. At times, new works are explicitly founded upon the structures or themes of their predecessors. Occasionally, by evoking past texts, they lend credence to their assertions or portray them as robust and sacrosanct. Alternatively, they may engender secondary and more intricate meanings by mirroring other texts within their own. When a text is predicated upon an antecedent text or exhibits traces of it, the former is termed the 'hypotext' and the latter, the 'hypertext'—the latter being a superimposition upon the former. This particular form of intertextuality is the focus of our research. The pivotal question we seek to address is whether Farrokhzad employed the mythemes of Demeter and Persephone as a hypotext, as delineated. A cursory examination of these mythological texts will facilitate our inquiry into this matter.

Hypotext: Demeter-Persephone myth

Firstly, this section provides a synopsis of the Demeter-Persephone myth, followed by an examination of its various intellectual aspects.

A synopsis of Demeter and Persephone Myth

In Greek mythology, Demeter is the daughter of Rhea and the granddaughter of Gaia. All three deities are revered as mothers of the earth and fertility. "As the goddess of grain, Demeter taught mortals how to plant, raise, and harvest corn, wheat, and barley." [23] Additionally, Demeter is celebrated as the goddess of birth, health, and marriage. [24] She has a daughter named Kore, which translates to 'maiden.' Kore, the progeny of Zeus and Demeter, delights in the sunshine and flowers. Hades, the sovereign of the underworld, becomes enamored with Kore and seeks Zeus's permission to wed her. Zeus informs him that Demeter would never consent to this union but suggests that he may abduct Kore.

One day, as Kore, Artemis, and Athena were strolling through the fields collecting flowers, Kore was captivated by an extraordinary bloom. As she reached to pluck it and add it to her basket, the earth suddenly split open. Hades emerged in his golden chariot and abducted the innocent maiden. Kore's cries for help echoed in the air. Demeter searched the heavens and the earth for nine days and nights but found no trace of her daughter. Ultimately, it was Helios who disclosed to her the abduction by Hades. Enraged, Demeter "first punished Sicily: If no one could inform her of her daughter's fate, she would withhold her life-giving gifts. Consequently, she destroyed the plows, slaughtered the oxen and the farmers who owned them, and commanded the earth to wither and spoil the seeds within." [23] Alarmed by this response, Zeus spoke with Demeter and explained that if Persephone had not consumed anything in the underworld, she would be permitted to return to Earth.

Then Zeus dispatched Hermes to the underworld to retrieve Persephone. Hades agreed to her return, but in a final act, he tricked Persephone into eating a pomegranate seed. Upon reuniting with her mother, Demeter inquired whether Persephone had consumed anything in the underworld. Persephone admitted to eating a pomegranate seed. Demeter was once again engulfed in sorrow, but at that moment, Demeter's mother, Rhea, arrived and relayed Zeus's decree: despite Persephone's consumption, she would be permitted to live on Earth with her mother for half or two-thirds of the year, only having to spend the remainder in the underworld. Thus, the seasons emerged: the onset of spring coincided with Persephone's ascent to the Earth's surface, initiating the growth of plants and the fertility of animals. Conversely, Demeter's grief during her daughter's absence brought about the barren winter. [23]

intellectual aspects of Demeter-Persephone

In the 2014 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, the myth of Demeter and Persephone is analyzed in two contexts: patriarchal and pre-patriarchal. The pre-patriarchal version focuses on the sexual awakening of Persephone: "Kore, the name of Demeter's child, signifies 'Daughter' and 'Girl' or 'Maiden.' As Persephone, the Maiden Goddess embodies the sexually awakening daughter transitioning from girlhood to womanhood." She also assumes her mother's roles as Thesmophoros (Law-bearer) and Saviouress. [24] However, the more significant aspect of the myth pertains to understanding the concepts and cycles of fertility, death, and rebirth. "Demeter's disheveled appearance while searching for Persephone mirrors the earth's (Demeter's) yearning for the missing seed (Persephone) and its solitude in the dark heart of the underworld." Persephone is akin to a seed removed from the goddess of the earth, awaiting rebirth in the hands of Hades. [25]

According to the myth, the emergence of the seasons is attributed to a divine agreement. Before this event, fertility was unending. However, following the abduction, fertility only resumed when Persephone returned to the surface of the Earth; it ceased during her time in the underworld. In various narratives, Demeter is depicted as a bearer of a sickle or as a grieving mother. Persephone is portrayed as a tall and robust woman with a formidable presence and cold gaze. Like her husband, she is also a goddess of death, and the underworld is a realm where all are equal and its decrees are absolute. [26]

Results Discussion: Intertextuality of Demeter-Persephone and Farrokhzad's poem

I'man Biavarim be Aghaz-e Fasle Sard is one of the poems that illustrates Farrokhzad's profound understanding of the essence of modern poetry. [27] In this section, I use an intertextual approach to assess the poem in comparison with the aforementioned myth. The main mythemes of the myth are (1) the past, characterized by walking in the sunshine and among the flowers; (2) abduction and sexual awakening or violation; (3) the cessation of fertility by Demeter; and (4) the reunion of mother and daughter and the emergence of seasons. We can demonstrate the intertextuality by identifying the signs of these four mythemes in the poem. This poem begins with the first day of Dey in the Persian calendar (December 21):

Emrooz rooz-e avval-e Deymah ast/ Man rāz-e fasl-hā rā midānam/ Va harf-e lahze-hā rā mifahmam/ Nejāt-dahande dar goor khofte ast / Va khāk, khāk-e pazeirande/ Esharatist be ārāmesh [28]

Since it seems that the abduction (Second Mytheme) already happened, the first mytheme appears as a regret for a happy past and whether she can feel the heat and light of the sun and flowers in this poem:

*Ayā dobāre gisovānam rā / dar bād shāne khāham zad? / Ayā dobāre bāghche-hā rā banafshe khāham kāsht?
 / Va sham'dāni-hā rā / dar āsemān-e posht-e panjere khāham gozāsht?*

Also, The poet repeats to her mother four times, “This is the end/ it always happened before you think,” which echoes Persephone's realization of her fate—that she must return to the underworld and her acceptance of it.

*Be madaram goftam: “Digar tamam shod”/ Goftam: “Hamishe pish az ānke fekr koni ettefāq mi’oftad/
 Bāyad barāye rooznāme tasliyatī befrestim”*

Additionally, the poem's setting appears to be the underworld, depicted as a place replete with bodies. Themes of darkness and night recur throughout the work. Moreover, the narrator frequently contemplates her mortality:

*Jenāzehā-ye khoshbakht / Janāzehā-ye malool / Janāzehā-ye sāket-e motafakker / Janāzehā-ye khosh-
 barkhord, khosh-poosh, / Khosh-khorāk / Dar istgāhhā-ye vaqt-hā-ye mo'ayyan / Va dar zamine-ye mashkook
 noorhā-ye movaqqat*

*Mā mesle mordehā-ye hezārān hezār sāleh be ham mirasim va āngāh / Khorshid bar tabāhi ajsād mā qazāvat
 khāhad kard.*

*Salām ey shab-e masoom! / Salām ey shabi ke cheshm-hā-ye gorg-hā-ye biyābān rā / Be hofereh-hā-ye
 ostekhāni imān va e'etemād badal mikoni / Va dar kenār-e joybārhā-ye to, arvāh-e bīdhā / Arvāh-e mehrabān
 tabarhā rā miboyand / Man az jahān-e bi-tāfāvoti fekrhā va harfhā va sedāhā miāyam / Va in jahān be lāneh-
 ye mārān mānand ast / ... / Man az kojā miāyam? / Man az kojā miāyam? / Ke inchonin be booy-e shab
 āgheshte-am? / Hanoz khāk-e mazārash tāzeh-ast / Mazār-e ān do dast-e sabz-e javān rā migoyam*

Furthermore, in this poem, the poet's lover possesses numerous qualities akin to Hades. The acts of love occur within an elusive darkness. Additionally, considering that Persephone's marriage signified her demise in some respects, the poem suggests that lovemaking is akin to embarking on a journey—a journey into darkness and coldness:

Man sardam ast / Man sardam ast va engār hichvaght garm nakhāham shod

*Negāh kon ke dar injā / Zamān che vazni dārad / Va māhiyan chegooneh goosht-hāye marā mijavand / Cherā
 marā hamishe dar tah-e daryā negāh midari... / ?*

*Engār madaram geristeh bood ān shab / ān shab ke man be dard residam va notfeh shekl gereft / ān shab ke
 man aroos-e khoshe-hāye aghāghi shodam.... /*

*Che mehrbān boodi ey yār / Che mehrbān boodi vaghti dorogh migofti / Che mehrbān boodi vaghti ke
 pelk-haye ayene-ha ra mibasti / Va chelcherāg-hā rā / Az sāqeh-haye simi michidi / Va dar siyāhi-e zālem
 marā besooy-e charagāh-e eshgh mibordi... /*

*Va jāye panj shakhe-ye angosht-hāye to / Ke mesle pānj harf-e haqiqat boodand / Chegooneh rooy-e gooneh-
 ye uo māndeh āst.*

As I mentioned before the initial name of Persephone was Kore which means maiden. Farrokhzad refers to this maidenhood twice in her poem:

Cherā navāzesh rā be hojb-e gisovān-e bākeregi bordand

Gooyi bek ā rat-e ro'y ā -ye porshokooh-e mar ā / Ba khod be sooy-e bastar mibord

However, Gubar interprets the 'Marriage of Death' as a metaphor for sexual awakening, equating it to the acquisition of wisdom. The descent into the underworld is seen as a spiritual journey, fostering a holistic understanding of the earth and the wisdom of fertility. This interpretation is echoed in the works of Lessing, Atwood, and Rich, who draw upon this myth. As previously mentioned, Farrokhzad has also attained this wisdom, as expressed in her verse, 'I know the secrets of the seasons' (Man rāz-e fasl-hā rā midānam). The third mytheme is the cessation of fertility that happens by the imprisonment of Persephone in the underworld and it is also a significant theme in Farrokhzad's poem by repeatedly mentioning the commencement of winter and the cold and sad blue color:

Zamān gozasht va sā'at chahār bār navākht (four times)

Zamān gozasht va shab rooy-e shākh-e-hāye lokht-e aghāghi oftad

Ayā to hargez ān chahār lāleh-e ābi rā / booyideh-i?

Kalāq-hā-ye pir-e enzewā / dar bāq-hāye pir-e kasālat micharkhand

Iman biāvarim be āghāz-e fasl-e sard / Iman biāvarim be virāne-hāye bāq-hāye takhayyol/ be dās-hāye vāzhgoon-shode-ye bikār/ va dāne-hāye zendāni/ negāh kon ke che barfī mibārad... / Shāyad haqiqat ān do dast-e javān bood, ān do dast-e javān/ ke zir-e bāresh-e yekriz-e barf madfoon shod

Farrokhzad, also in many lines has the intention to return to the world of the living like Persephone's return, and in the final scene she hopes that the hands that are buried under the snow will blossom in spring (Fourth Mytheme):

Shāyad haqiqat ān do dast javān bood, ān do dast-e javān / ke zir-e bāresh-e yekriz-e barf madfoon shod / va sāl-e digar, vaghti bahār / bā āsmān-e posht panjere hamkhābeh mishavad / va dar tanash favarān mikonand / fowārehāye sabz-e sāqehāye sabokbār / shokoofeh khāhad dād ey yār, ey yegāneh-tarin yār / Imān biāvarim be āghāz-e fasl-e sard...

It appears that upon becoming aware of "the secret of seasons," the poet feels a sense of responsibility for the mating and fertility of plants. Coupled with her love of nature, she expresses concern for birds in the final verses:

Va man be joft-giri-ye gol-hā mi-andisham / be qoncheh-hā-yi bā sāq-hā-ye lāqar-e kam-khoon

Man az goftan mi-mānam, amā zabān-e gonjeshkān/ Zabān-e zendegi-e jomle-hā-ye jāri-e jashn-e tabi'at ast/ Zabān-e gonjeshkān ya'ani: bahār, barg, bahār/ Zabān-e gonjeshkān ya'ani: nasim, atr, nasim

Conclusions

In early mythology, fertility symbols are invariably represented by women. The Demeter-Persephone myth elucidates the cycles of death and rebirth. Persephone, symbolized as a seed, is confined beneath the soil for half of the year. During the other half, she ascends to the realm of the living, and fertility is restored to plants, animals, and humans. However, as the myth unfolds, Kore transforms into Persephone, and through her spiritual odyssey, she discovers her power and divinity. Additionally, fertility ceases repeatedly.

When we examine the poem "Imān Biāvarim be Aqāz-e Fasl-e Sard" in its entirety, we observe how Farrokhzad draws parallels between her fate and that of Persephone. The poem employs symbolism such as "Dās-hāye vāzhgoon shode-ye bi-kār" (useless abandoned sickles) and "Dāne-hā-ye zendāni" (imprisoned seeds). It also alludes to themes of transformation, such as becoming the bride of acacia clusters, the loss of maidenhood, existing in a realm akin to the underworld and decaying in bridal attire adorned with a crown of love. The recurrent mention of the number four, symbolizing the creation of the fourth season, and the depiction of the dead sprouting from the Earth, signify phytomorphosis as a metaphor for resurrection and rebirth. These elements collectively demonstrate that Farrokhzad's poetry fully embodies the mythemes of the Demeter-Persephone myth.

The evidence of Farrokhzad's philosophical and mythical contemplations on death and rebirth is prominent in her poetry. Her personal life also mirrors that of Persephone, from whom she derives the wisdom and power of the goddess. The journey to the underworld is "Not merely an acceptance of her own androgynous sexuality, this recognition constitutes a rescue operation... Rich returns to the motifs of the myth to describe her anguish over the destructive violence of patriarchy, her nurturing love for other women, the celebration of female strength and creativity." [29]

After these experiences, Farrokhzad attains a distinct wisdom, akin to a profound feminine insight. She is beckoned to the "accepting soil" on the 21st of December, where she discerns the secret of the seasons, the redemptive power residing in the grave, and ultimately finds tranquility. This enlightenment distinguishes the primary differences between her poetry's last two volumes and the preceding ones. Now, she assumes the mantle of Earth's mother in her immortal transformation. The roots of other lives delve into her soil, and Poplars rise from her essence. [30]

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