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A Critique of the Political Prospects of the Sufi Myth in Moyez G. Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song*

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Abstract:

A 'myth' traditionally represents an apparent historical event that in the course of its narration reveals the cognitive orientation of the concerned community and also legitimizes their customary belief and practices. Moyez G. Vassanji, who belongs to the Khoja Ismaili community which is a major branch of Shi'ism, conceives the origin of the fictionalised Shamsi community in his *The Assassin's Song*. He creates a narrative of the arrival of the mysterious sufi, Nur Fazal, who is known as Pir Bawa by his followers, to India. So the important question that arises in this context is why there was a need for constructing the sufi myth in the text taken up for study.

This paper delineates on how the sufi myth is shaped by the environment in which it was visualized by the author as the mythmaker. Though it is a branch of Islam, it has assimilated the religious and cultural practices of the dominant religious group, i.e the Hindus and has become a syncretic religious community. The attempt of this paper is to assess how the Shamsis negotiate with the politics of the land that is dominated by religious differences. In a place where the Muslims are usually identified by their religious identity, the author creates a hybrid religion where the practitioner of the faith is neither a Hindu nor a Muslim and thus occupies a liminal space of belonging as well as not belonging to both the religious beliefs. Thus this paper focuses on the political prospects of the sufi myth while deliberating on the socio-cultural predicaments of the Shamsis as they occupy a liminal position which further relegates them to a marginalised position. It also examines the archetypes that are found in the aforementioned myth.

Keywords: Archetype, Khoja Ismaili, Liminal space, Myth, Shamsi, Syncretic religion.

Introduction:

Almost every civilisation has its own reservoir of traditional myths and legends under which fall the group of stories that are profound, more authoritative, instructive, educational and closely connected to truth and reality. Most of these stories are orally passed down from one generation to another. Northrop Frye in his "Myth, Fiction and Displacement" defines 'myth' as a story that has gods or semi-divine characters possessing supernatural attributes. He also points out that in most cases the locations in myths are hardly historical. That explains why the narrative structures of the myths are abstract. As a result of that the creators of myths, in other words, the story-tellers have the advantage of not being plausible in presenting the supernatural actions involved in the narratives that are embellished with people, places, events and things from antiquity. (Frye pp. 348-368) However, according to Robin Brockmen, myths and legends do not have their origin in metaphysics. They are, undeniably, one of the most important apparatuses to build religious, racial or national consciousness. Usually 'myths' are associated with religion and the term 'legend', which is often misused, is related to a community history and identity. Legends narrate the stories of the successful feats of the ancestors of the community. In such narrations, one community, i.e., the nation, or the race or the tribe is often biased over the other communities. Sometimes a person can also achieve the status of being a legend in his lifetime because of a certain act. A myth, however, is complicated as it can be stashed with not just historical and religious elements but with political propagandas too. As a result of this, legends also become myths in the process but a myth rarely becomes legends.

The Sufi myth

The myth of the sufi, Nur Fazal whom his loyal devotees lovingly address as Pir Bawa is inspired by the story of Nur Satgur who had arrived in India in the twelfth century at the court of the king Jaisingh Siddhraj in Gujarat; the account of which is found, as claimed by Vassanji, in the translation works of Dr. Abu Aly Alibhai Aziz. While constructing the sufi legend, Vassanji took into cognizance the historical fact of the Muslim missionaries or *da'is* (Daftary 107) who had arrived in India in the medieval times. These Muslim mystics were called *pirs*. By adhering to this historical fact, he makes an impression upon the reader to consider the fictional story of

the sufi as authentic. And to substantiate the religious practice he also recreates *ginans* or devotional songs dedicated to Nur Fazal as is the tradition found in all religions to have hymns sung in devotion to their deity. He begins the story of the arrival of the sufi with the *ginan*:

From western lands to glorious Patan
He came, of moon visage and arrow eyes.
To the lake of a thousand gods he came
Pranam! sang the gods, thirty-three crores of them.
Saraswati, Vishnu, Brahma bade him inside
Shiva Nataraja brought him water to drink.
The god himself washed this Wanderer's feet
How could beloved Patan's sorcerers compete?
You are the true man, said the king, your wisdom great
Be our guest, show us the truth. (*The Assassin's Song* 4)

The sufi arrives at the kingdom of Vishal Dev during the glorious period of Patan Anularra in Gujarat in 1260 AD. Not many details are provided about the place of his origin except for the conjecture that he might be from Afghanistan or Persia and a snippet from his journey towards Hindustan establishes his status as an "exile for his belief" (ibid. 7) from his home that has been ravaged by the Mongol conquest.

This historical ellipsis in the narrative corresponds with the history of the Nizari Ismaili state at Alamut, Persia which was completely destroyed by the Mongols under Hulagu Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan in 1256 AD. It is to be noted that the Nizari Ismailis were considered as heretics or *malahida* (Daftary 107) by other Muslims. As a branch of Shia Muslim, the Ismailis were already in a protracted social conflict with the Sunni Muslim over the issue of the successor of the Prophet Muhammed. While the Sunni Muslims believe that Abu Bakr Abdullah Ibn Uthman, the father-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, is the successor of the Prophet after

his death; the Shia Muslims believe that Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin as well as the son-in-law of the Prophet is his rightful successor. While this contention still persists, the Ismailis also differ from the Twelver or *Imamiyyah* over the issue of Imamate. According to the religious belief of *Imamiyyah* there are only twelve divinely ordained imams who are the legitimate successors of the Prophet. They also believe that Imam al-Mahdi, the last imam who is considered as the "Imam of the Era" has gone in occultation and shall appear again to judge the world. But the Ismailis do not agree with the idea of the al-Mahdi going in occultation. They maintain that the al-Mahdi's position shall never remain empty and the rightful descendants of the Prophet and Ali ibn Abi Talib shall function as the Mahdi. Currently Aga Khan IV, Shah Karim al-Husayni is revered as the 49th Ismaili Imam. Farhad Daftary in his *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies: A Historical Introduction to an Islamic Community* states that because of their difference in terms of their belief and pluralistic religious practices, the Nizari Ismailis were persecuted by other Muslims as a result of which they adopted the practice of hiding their identity in the garb of a sufi without really being affiliated to any *tariqahs* or the Sufi order. This practice of concealment was called *taqiyya*. (p.107-112) This historical fact can be taken into consideration to comprehend the identity of the mystic Nur Fazal, in *The Assassin's Song*, who arrived in Gujarat like the other *da'is* as a sufi and kept his identity in concealment.

As it is natural, one expects the sufi to bring along with him his own cultural baggage and biases. This seems to be confirmed when he is informed during his voyage by a fellow traveler of the cultural difference between them and the Hindustanis. A clear dichotomy is drawn between the Muslims and the Hindus by emphasizing on the latter's practice of idol worshipping.

The sufi had been told during his long voyage, and often with a horrified look on the face of the informer, that the people of Hindustan worshipped not only idols of men and women, but also images of animals and, if that were not strange enough, the human procreative organs as well. ('And may God bring destruction on the infidels!') Some would sacrifice humans and eat the flesh of the head, others mutter nonsense syllables or roar like a bull after bathing in the sand. (Vassanji 7)

The Hindus are projected as the 'other' but according to the narrator the sufi does not endorse the same ideology because of his spiritual master's liberal teachings of showing equal

respect to other religions. However, an instance in the narration implicates otherwise. As the sufi stands on “the bank of sahasralinga talav, tank of a thousand Shiva shrines” (ibid.), a young pandit acting as a vigilante of the community calls him a ‘Mleccha’, a Sanskrit term for foreigner, and verbally abuses him for being an impure Muslim who has no right to cast his eyes upon the statue of Lord Shiva. As a response the sufi glances at the statue casually and to the utter amazement of the pandit, the statue of Lord Shiva jumps on the ground with a thud and runs in dancing steps towards the lake to get a jug of water for him to wash his feet. This event especially with the supernatural feat involved conveys the idea of the sufi’s superior power. On being taken to the King’s court, he explains the meaning of his name ‘Nur’, viz., ‘light’ and that he is a religious scholar who means no harm to the host kingdom. Just like the co-traveler of the sufi who clearly drew polarity between the two religious communities, the King Vishal Dev also expresses his suspicion of the Muslims.

‘Then tell me, O Light, what brings you to Gujarat? I understand that men of your faith in the north would like nothing better than to break the statues of our gods and force us to worship your one God, who does not show his face yet make many threats. Have you come to spy, then, on behalf of your Sultana Raziya of Delhi ...?’ (ibid. 10)

To which the Sufi responds by calling Hindustan a safe ‘haven of tolerance where differences in belief are not persecuted’ (ibid.). In other words, he gives an implication of the Muslim world which was oppressive for the creative as well as the spiritual growth of the Nizari Ismailis. And that he has come to seek for refuge in Hindustan. The king then recruits him as among the wise men of his court where he engages in numerous debates and other magical competitions and almost always emerges as the victor.

The narrator then points out that the world that the sufi came from was also as thriving as that of his host community.

He had brought rare knowledge with him, from the lands of the Muslims. At first he had been taken as a mere child, an ignorant foreigner, for didn’t all knowledge begin and end with the four Vedas? Weren’t the secrets of the Atman explained in the Upanishads? Weren’t all medicines described by the sages in the Ayurveda?

Weren't the laws of behaviour written down by Manu? Wasn't Rama the embodiment of the perfect man, and his bride Sita that of the perfect woman? Wasn't the world completely described in the Puranas? Hadn't the pundits of the land cracked open secrets of enumeration by their invention of the sacred zero, image of the great Om, the nothingness that was everything? (ibid. 16)

He found the Hindustanis conservative who lived happily in their bubble of ignorance about the world in the west. And as his fame rose, he was given respect reluctantly which he considers as a stepping stone for disseminating his knowledge from the Muslim world, which corresponds to the historical movement of the *da'is* out of Fatimid caliphate to propagate the religious doctrines of the Ismaili and also to acquire new converts. His reference to "the glories of Cordoba and Cairo, Baghdad and Bukhara; of the works of Avicenna and Galen, Omar Khayyam and Al-Tusi, Aristotle and Plato" (ibid.) also points at the intellectual and literary engagements of the *da'is* during the Alamut period, which was founded by Hassan-i-Sabbah who was a scholarly theologian. Under his rule, the Alamut castle established a huge library consisting of manuscripts of both Ismaili and non-Ismaili religions. It was also famous for its collections of "scientific tracts and instruments." (Daftary, 113)

Two Archetypal Women Characters in the Myth

The term 'archetype' is derived from the Greek words 'arche' and 'typos', meaning 'origin' and 'form' or 'pattern' respectively. According to Carl Gustav Jung, for each archetype there is a set of common patterns that influence the collective unconscious of a community, a nation and even eras. That explains the presence of common mythological motifs in all races irrespective of the different geographies they are located in. For instance, since the culture of Islam is patriarchal, the myth of the sufi is expected to endorse patriarchy without giving much voice to the female characters. Amanda Vajskop in her "Finding Patterns in the Chaos: Woman as Chaos Agent in Creation Myths" deliberates on Eve and Virgin Mary as archetypes of fallen and righteous women respectively. Just like Eve, who disobeys God by eating fruit from the tree of knowledge and becomes the temptress by leading Adam to commit sin by following her; in the Sufi myth too, the courtesan Priyanti seduces the sufi and leads him astray that results with his spiritual downfall as he could no longer see nor hear his master in his meditation as a consequence.

It was as if a wall had come between them, which he could not surmount; all he could do was to beat his head against it and weep. (Vassanji, 21)

This scene remotely recalls the scene of the after-fall of Adam and Eve when they hid behind the rows of trees which served as a wall that separated them from God with whom they would other-wise have very close communion. Thereafter being dejected, the sufi considers the riot in the coppersmith's bazaar, where his followers, including his first follower and interpreter, Arjun Dev were killed, as a punishment for his sin. And in this way, the courtesan Priyanti becomes an agent of chaos like many female characters in myths and legends.

More disgracefully and contemptuously drawn is the character of Panuti, whose name resembles the hindi term *panauti* which means 'an unlucky person whose bad luck is contagious to others'. It also brings in mind another famous unfortunate mythological woman character, viz., Medusa, the gorgon, who was born a mortal with a beautiful face and hair but was cursed with a hideous face and snakes on her head in place of hair by goddess Athena for desecrating the sacredness of her temple. Ironically, her role in the act of desecration was that of a victim of rape by the sea god Poseidon. In the myth, whosoever looks at her turns into a stone. And it is Perseus, who with his wisdom and divine help decapitates her head. In the sufi myth too, there is this "strange, wild-looking woman...; her hair disheveled, her eyes were red, her flabby, grimy face angry and defiant." (ibid. 13) She challenges the sufi in an open competition by putting a four feet long snake, head first, inside her mouth. She swallows the entire snake in front of a cheering crowd, which after sometimes slithers away from under her skirt. She attempts the same feat again but this time, the snake does not come out of her body. And as she squats, writhes, and whimpers, she approximates a pregnant woman in labour. It is only when the sufi nonchalantly speaks to her saying that the snake lost its track for a fleeting moment that the snake leaves her body. In both these myths, the monstrous looking female characters are subordinated by male characters.

Then there is the image of Rupa Devi who, like the Virgin mother, the archetypal image of purity, selflessness, sacrifice, and obedience becomes the spiritual mother of the followers of the sufi even before she consummates her marriage with the sufi. Her devotion to the sufi is akin to Mirabai's devotion to Krishna. Even as a young child of five years, she was divinely inspired to wait for her groom and when she turned of age, she "spent much time in prayer and

meditation. She undertook frequent fasts" (ibid. 67) and would always send a hunter everyday to the jungle to kill a deer. After taking a piece of venison, she would distribute the meat to the poor. But one day after eating the meat, she becomes aware of the presence of the sufi through divine vision. And with the condition put forward by the Hindu king, Devija that the sufi will not convert his daughter Rupade, the couple are married off in a Hindu ceremony. For their dowry, the king gives them land in the jungle, where they make their home and in the course of time it becomes a pilgrim site for the devoted followers. Thus, the purpose of the myth is served in establishing the historical and religious worth of the Pir Baag in the fictionalized Haripir.

Liminal status of the syncretic religion

It is to be noted that the Khoja Ismailis of India have developed their own unique culture called Satpanth which synthesizes both Ismailism and Hinduism in their traditional practices. It has led to the birth of a syncretic religion. An illustration from *The Assassin's Song* is the Rupa Devi temple which is maintained by the women devotees of the Pir Bawa. Inside the temple there is a *gaadi*, a throne on which the portrait of Rupa Devi is placed along with other Hindu goddesses such as Lakshmi, Durga and Saraswati. However, the temple is not located inside the Pir Baag which houses the grave of Pir Bawa and other minor Muslim saints only. According to Farhad Daftary, the *da'is*, who are addressed as the *pirs* in India, have employed a unique syncretism in their preaching in order to appeal to the non-Islamic milieu, who predominantly belong to the Hindu community. That also explains why their teachings are infused with myths and symbols from Hinduism. Even the doctrine concerning the imamate is narrated within the framework of the Hindu mythology. As is the case with the fictionalized myth of the sufi in the aforementioned novel, in which a Hindu princess waits upon her divine groom who apparently is a Muslim and their marriage symbolically represents the bridging of the gap between the two communities. Historically, this term 'Satpanth' was used by the Khoja Ismailis to identify themselves with their Muslim roots as they continue to retain their Muslim names despite the hybrid religion that they practiced. However, it's sub-group, known as the Imamshahis have a different approach than the medieval Ismailis. They retain their Hindu names and continue practicing their Hindu beliefs and traditions such as chanting 'Om' and using Hindu symbols such as 'swastika'; but at the same time, they also continue using Persian or Arabic prayers known as *duas* in their prayer.

An instance from the novel that also compels the readers to think is when Karsan Dargawalla, the main protagonist changes his name to Krishna Fazal. While this moment in the narrative focuses on issues such as transnationalism and an Indian immigrant's experience in Canada; one cannot ignore the characteristic fusion of the Hindu and Muslim names in the name Krishna Fazal. This name is a proof of his ancestor's legacy upon him. Though he had long given up his role of being the successor of the Saheb, i.e., the caretaker of the Pir baag and had consciously decided not to return back to Haripir, the culture and the tradition that define his identity did not leave him. He typically represents his community whose identity is torn between the Muslim and the Hindu identities. There are more than couple of times when Karsan as a child confusingly ponders upon his identity, whether he is a Muslim or a Hindu. These moments of deep internal query were the results of the external conflicts between the two religious communities post-partition of India and the almost catastrophic riot-like situation in his hometown which ended with the murder of Salim Buckle who was held responsible for desecrating the family shrine of the Damanis.

M.G.Vassanji in his interview to Pankaj K. Singh explains this confusion regarding this unique syncretic identity of the community in the context of *The Assassin's Song* by saying that though the pir, Nur Fazal is a Muslim who might have come from Persia, the Ismailis in India are ethnically Indians and this fact must be recognised. He emphasizes that they cannot be considered as converts as this community that comprises of Gujaratis, Punjabis and others is the result of the Bhakti Movement in India. But this aspect of the Bhakti Movement that involves Sufism has been ignored by the mainstream academics. In contradiction to the popular idea of associating the Bhakti Movement with a movement in Hinduism, according to Raza Naeem, it was a collective movement that involved both the lower-class Hindus and Muslims whose predecessors were Muslim sufis such as Kabir and Guru Nanak.

Conclusion

The story of the sufi in *The Assassin's Song* has the features of being a legend as it focuses on the story of a person in a particular historical time and is concerned with the identity of a specific community. However, it also has magical elements as are characteristics of mythological stories and since it is an integral part of the religious belief of the concerned community; it is elevated to the status of a myth. The political dimension of the myth can be

deciphered in its attempt at being inclusive by accommodating a Hindu princess as the wife of the sufi, a status that automatically makes her the goddess-mother of the devoted followers. The myth also corresponds to the status of the Khoja Ismailis who are originally Indians but because of their hybrid religion and cultural practices, they face challenges and are marginalised. In the myth, the sufi adapted himself to the cultural environment of Hindustan and made a home for himself and his followers. But post-Independence of India, the communal difference between the Hindus and the Muslims took a violent turn for the Khojas Ismailis. And post- Godhra incident, its liminal status was not recognised and they were looked upon as Muslims by the Hindu zealots and the Pirbaag was destroyed as a repercussion to the alleged involvement of the Muslim extremists in burning the train returning from Ayodhya to Ahmedabad, where the victims were Hindu pilgrims.

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