

Feminine Sexual Identity in Persian Legends and Myths

Sajadpour Farzaneh and Jamali sosefi Ebrahim

Abstract—This study attempts to demonstrate the role of folkloric culture in forming feminine identity which itself is in direct relationship with social identity. Identity is a dynamic entity which forms social interactions in a culturally connected context. The aim of this study is to investigate into the process of formation of sexual identity among Lorestan (A province in the West of Iran) inhabitant from childhood, which are directed and reinforced by their cultural specifications. Using anthropological approach and by clearly classifying the cultural elements effective in the formation of identity, this research attempts to evaluate the effect of Persian myths on the Lorestan legends. The methodology chosen for the study was based on qualitative and in-depth approach in the collection of data. In the first step of the research, a series of Lori legends were collected, then the most common and the highly effective ones, from among the data collected in the field, were fully analyzed and thought on to find out more about the process of identity formation. Since anthropological approach is chosen in the process of data collection and data analysis, not only effective variables were determined but those cultural elements substituting the legendary figures and heroes in the lori folklore were also introduced and analyzed

Index Terms—Folkloric legends Persian myths, sexual identity, Lorestan

I. INTRODUCTION

Culture is a complex system of social acts in which the actors are involved in incessant challenges of the past and the present. Auguste Comte considers society of the living and the dead (Vosughi and Nikkholgh 51:1374). In other words, what is considered as the cultural heritage of an ethnic group exists vigorously in the current social life. Although the past has gone, its beliefs have been inherited by the posterity. Undoubtedly, these beliefs are tinted with new colors in the process of transferring from the past to the present or presented in a new form and system. "In fact, what we call it as culture nowadays was used to be considered as myth and ceremony in ancient time" (Bahar, 199: 1373). Although modern man believes no longer in gods and their astonishing powers and calls ancient myths superstition- and not the old beliefs of the people in the past- his social acts and even his rationality is, unconsciously, influenced by the intellectual system of mythology.

The feminine sexual identity is not an exception from this issue as well. In spite of the recreation of new sexual identity in Iran, "femininity" is still reminiscent of ancient myths that outspread their vague and dark shadow over the intellectual system of men and women. Popular culture plays an

important role in forming identity elements within a culture.

Folklore provides the ground for the manifestation of profound and long lasting mentality of a nation. Beliefs are not expressed in the form of moral codes rather have found their place in all the aspects of every day culture in the form of legends, songs and proverbs, etc....

Felinity as one of the undeniable and real concepts is dynamically present in the everyday culture of the people. That is why the feminists in the late 1960s criticized the everyday culture and believed its to be contributing to the emergence and maintenance of some behaviors against women which were introduced as "unfair, unjust and exploitative". [1]

Accordingly, we can trace the influential elements in the formation of an ethnic group's cultural identity through unimportant parts. The emphasis on legends indicates their relationship with mythology; in a reduced form, an important part of legends is the essence of mythological beliefs, and as myths introduce themselves, they are a kind of religious thinking system or an ancient worldview. In fact, they are man's first attempts to find answer for his fundamental questions.

The atmosphere of the story in the legend like other literary genres affects the process of personification. Whatever related in the legends expenses some aspects of every day culture and social conventions. Women as a part of the society play an active role and thus are fully visible in the legends, too. This happens to the extent that even in animal legends personification based on sexuality can be easily seen. Therefore, legend can demonstrate the feminine identity in every culture. Now the question is that whether the definition we have in the everyday culture of the feminine identity is taken from the social realities or it is the realization of social expectations? Have the random narrators of the legends portrayed women they could be observed in the society or have they recreated a new identity for women based on their own mentality?

In other words, is women's status in Lori popular legends another form of unequal social situation and based on patriarchal system? Or is actor's field of action in the legends defined beyond the social limits?

Obviously, exact answer to this question would be very difficult.

For, most of the legends don't belong to a specific period. In more general view, even the element of place lessens can be detected in the legends. However, legends have played an important role in the restructuring of the culture and even in socializing the participants in the society. General view point towards women, social expectation regarding the forms of role playing, ways of social interaction which is expected in legends represent aspects of social realities which has maintained its conformity with sexual identity.

To investigate into the above mentioned, initially Lorestan legends were collected. This process took nearly two years and consisted of three stages: firstly going to villages in the province and recording the legends which the elderly were relating. Secondly, transcribing the legend in the local dialect using the phonological property of the dialect. And thirdly, selecting the complete legends and classifying them based on Arne-Thompson model.

The total number of the legends collected in the first stage was 365 of which after screening 289 were chosen and classified using the mentioned model; likewise, 197 of the classified legends were put in the class of magic and witchcraft. For the analytic study of the content and uncovering the feminine identity in the Lorestan legends, reverses questionnaire was used to elicit information and the carefully studied, which comparing them to Persian myths. The end result will be presented after give a brief account on Persian myths.

Woman in Persian mythology

The mythological image of woman as "demonic other" versus "divine self" is one of the most ancient archetypes in many cultures. This is also observable in Persian mythology.

II. THE UNDERLYING CONCEPT OF PERSIAN MYTHS

Considering the subject under study, we are not to give a literal definition on the word myth or even to find some way to distinguish the concept of myths from legend or to uncover its religious or non-religious root. Rather our aim is to precisely determine the scope under investigation to be able to present the Persian feminine identity in Lorestan legends.

Persian myths have either been inspired by some other nations' myths or have influenced other nations' believes, with the emergence of Zoroaster the system of myths in Iran found special order and form because it was redirected from polytheism to monotheism. On this journey from polytheism to monotheism ancient god and goddesses were introduced in different form, and also classified a new system of hierarchy in terms of authority and importance. Ormazd, good God and goodness, as the only god and the creator of all good beings, has taken all the other gods under his wings, and thus the other gods have hold the due places in lower ranks. He is the most important Persian god which, at least during Achaemenid dynasty was highly respected and that "the name of this Persian god can be translated as the god of wisdom".[2]

Standing in the second place, Emshaspandan who are the lower rank gods and against them there is a demon, in terms of importance are as follows: Bahman, Ordibehesht, Shahrivar, Sepandarmaz, Khordad and Amordad.

This six Emshaspands are true manifestation of the devine attributes and also very important part of Zoroaster's abstract thinking regarding the creator.[3] argues "the concept of the six generous immortal forms the foundation of Zoroaster's teaching." [4]

The third rank is taken by the ancient gods and goddesses some of whom are also praised in Veda. Therefore they belong to the era when Indo Europeans had not started their historic immigrations, such as gods and goddesses like Mehr (Mitra in Veda). Or even some of them stem from

Mesopotamia such as Anahita who had been affected by Sumerian's goddesses Ishtar. She replaces Venus, water and fertility goddess, in Iranian mythology.

In the other ranks, are the gods and the human such as semi legendary and semi historical gods and humans.

Characterization in Lori legends

The analysis of gender relationship in the area of culture and its comparison to the characterization in the Persian mythology is the starting point for understanding and studying intellectual system which underlies the social acts narrated in legends. What is offered in Lori legends for the description of women shows also parts of a system of beliefs and convictions in Persian mythology.

III. COMPONENT OF FEMININE IDENTITY IN LORESTAN MYTHS

The feminine concept in Lorestan myths is clearly manifested. In all the myths which are studied, at least one woman can be seen. In 25 myths, the protagonist is a feminine who is either directly involved in the myth or disguised under the man's clothing. In 115 myths, women are introduced as the persona-non-grata and the villains who are in the way of the protagonist, making lots of problems for him. In 50 other investigated myth, a wicked woman fights against the hero of the story and is finally defeated and killed or banished by the protagonist. In 27 other myths the woman plays the role of a cruel step mother and 42 myths introduce the woman as a sorceress or cunning witch challenged by the hero. The mentioned statements are a part of quantities results of the concept analysis of the research. However, the following classification of the component parts of feminine personality in Lorestan myths or in Persian myths can be derived, considering the fundamental hypotheses of the study.

A. *Obedience and Ignorance*

Social expectations for women reflect a kind of obedience from men in legends. Any kind of disobedience is deemed as a crime with its own special punishment.

Obedience with the frequency of 156 times mentioned is one of the main attributes. This attribute can also clearly be observed in today's life. A part of this obedience is manifested in the constant presence in home and doing feminine jobs. In an unequal social relationship with men, women suffer from a kind of labor division in which their domestic works are without payment while men's outside works are with payment. Primarily, men are associated with outside and women with inside the home. In fact, the existing social system influences, through indirect ways, the minds of legend narrators who portray social relationship. Society demands women to be fully obedient to men and this is justified under morality and religion. In Lorestan myth, any kind of this obedience on the part of women against father or husband or even social norms is severely blamed and despised. In some myths women are even praised for having this kind of attributes.

Among Emshaspands Sepandarmazd, Khordad, Amordad, have feminine features. In addition to their feminine name, the roles and responsibilities are defined fully femininely.

Interesting point about these three is their position in "Garootman", Zoroastrian paradise and heavenly Place of Ormazd and Emshaspands, that is, while male Emshaspands have occupied the right side of the Ormazd, god of goodness and truth in Zoroastrianism, these female goddesses take the left side position in the heavenly assembly.[5]

In other words, the idea of second sex can be seen even female Emshaspands. Among these three female goddesses, Sepandarmaz holds the highest position in term of importance. She is the goddess of the earth [6] and "the manifestation of loyal obedience, religious conformity and worship". [5]

She is sometimes introduced as Ormazd's daughter and some other times as his wife. She is the protector of faithful loving wives. [4]

However, her true importance lies in the special features and attributes which remind us of the fundamental characteristics of the feminine identity. "As the earth is the bearer of all the burdens, she is also a true manifestation of forbearance and tolerance", [6]. She is the perfect incarnation of Ormazd humility in Avesta [7]. Devil's disobedience and dissatisfaction are the opposite counter part of her attributes. In fact, perfect and full obedience and forbearance are the true manifestations of the feminine virtue in this Emshaspand. There is no border to be defined for the extent of forbearance and any kind of dissatisfaction and disobedience is considered a kind of devilish behavior and attribute to the devil. Therefore, a woman who doesn't tolerate any kind of difficulty and hardship is a kind of persona non grata. This is perfectly witnessed in the public culture of Persia. Women are always encouraged to be mute and tolerant. Adaptation is one of idea attributes in Lorestan myths.

B. Beauty Conceals Ignorance

Thinking is a characteristic usually ignored in legends as if it is a feature not necessary for women. On the contrary, appearance and beauty are characteristics of great emphasis. In fact, beauty is one of the main features functioning as a component part of Lorestan myths. Thus, women are divided into two groups:

- 1) Beautiful women who deserve the men's love.
- 2) Ugly women who commit evil acts.

For example, in the story Mahpishooni, a prince falls in love with a beautiful girl. She is the one of who even helps demons and villains in the story. In contrast, her step sister is an ugly and wicked girl.

In other words, masculinity is a kind of supremacy and every characteristic or behavior related to it is adorable and in a direct relationship with culture and sagacity. On the contrary, femininity and feminine issues contain the least levels of culture within them. Femininity seems to equal ignorance and inability.

In Lorestan myths the protagonist comes across the picture of a beautiful girl and falls head over heel at firstsight. In the classification of the myths, this beautiful girl is put in the group of the good while the adjectives of old hag and ugly woman are used to demonstrate the negative feminine feature.

However, wisdom and feminine mentality receives the least amount of emphasis. Mentality is frequently used in

parallel with feminine deceitfulness, and we will go back to it in next chapters. From all the myths studied only 5 of them give a picture of wise and thoughtful women. It seems that in Lorestan myths beauty for women is of more importance than wisdom.

This is the case in Persian myths, too. Anahita is one of the goddesses of the ancient Persia. Who is the head of other legendary goddesses? She is paid attention to by the powerful people at some specific eras of history. Tirdad I, one of the sassanians' king, coroneted in one of the temples of Venus. The sasani dynasty and for fathers guarded the temple of Venus in Estakhr where the fire was set and kept and according to some researchers fire-worshipping was particularly because of this goddess[8]. She was so powerful that "Apam Napat" the god ruling the waters was totally overshadowed and somehow replaced by her in the Persian myths [6]. In Avesta, there is a perfect description on her. She is described as a very beautiful woman with perfect body and beautiful face, with precious jewels on. In addition, she is the one who puts fertility into women's womb and purity to men's reproducing organ.

Furthermore, beauty of the appearance and attention to luxury account for a part of the Persian feminine identity. In Lorestan myths, although women's face is not described, distinction between a beautiful woman and an ugly one can clearly be seen. In Persian myths, this beautiful personality is repeatedly mentioned as: "once there was a king who had a dazzlingly beautiful daughter, or the king's son fell in love with a beautiful girl who was unique.... Whoever, regarding masculine personality, attributes such as: wise, sharp-mind, powerful, etc are considered as the outstanding criteria [9]. This is what exactly paid attention to in Persian myths, for example, not only Anahita but also some others like "Din", forgiving goddess, and "Ashi", goddess of conscience, are described as having beautiful face. For instance, in a part of Avesta, Din is described as having attractive body and posture, white and shining arms, powerful charming, free, respected family background and seemingly 15-years old with the beauty in her body as much as the beauty in all the other creation combined [7]. In the description of goddesses and female Emshaspands, physical strength and also wisdom are hardly referred to. Lack of description on physical strength is, to some extent, understandable, however, lack of emphasis on wisdom, though is not a sign of foolishness on the part of goddesses, and represents low importance of this attribute in these women's identity.

In Persian myths Bahman is the incarnation of wisdom and divine mentality who naturally has a masculine identity. This belief can also be observed among used people. Some believe that wisdom is solely a masculine attribute and by using terms like "the elderly mediator" present women from interfering in important affairs. Generally speaking, thoughtfulness is a masculine attribute in Persian society and women are known to be "inadequate" in their thoughtfulness. Although, women have never been considered fools, lack of emphasis on this attribute in them has contributed to this untrue perceptions and judgments.

C. Charming and Feminine Wickedness

In some legends women are represented as the symbol of

wickedness and lust. They lead men to destruction by their feminine charm and wiles. This characteristic shows, expressively, the status of women in ancient Persian community.

By and large, fairy (nymph) comes as a charmer in the way of the heroes and tries to allure them. This imaginary feminine being, is a celestial figure that others can't see. Among all people, only the hero can see the fairy and can always captivate her with a needle or a pin. As long as, the hero of this own volition, or under the fairies' deceit, hasn't pulled out the needle from her dress, the fairy will be under his control. Therefore, as stated in Lorestan legends, the hero only after materialization of his wish which can be done by the fairy cuts her loose.

However, in some other legends, the fairy releases herself by deceiving the hero. In some of the legends, intelligent women are introduced as deceitful and cunning. These women often achieve their goals by manipulating a powerful man or through witchcraft. These are the precise attributes considered for women in Persian myths; deceitfulness and craftiness. This attribute which, along with other features, contributes to the Persian feminine identity is ascribed to both divine and devilish beings. In Persian mythology, while Afrasiab, the enemy of the Iranians, cut the water of the river on Iranian soldiers, Sepandarmaz, a beautiful woman, went to Manuchehr's house, one of the Iranian commanders, which was captured by Afrasiab. Afrasiab fell head over heels on her but she put a condition for their union, that is, to let go to the water. Afrasiab served the term but she disappeared into the ground [6].

As a negative attribute, women again, can use temptation as a negative tool better than others. The term Fairy represents beauty and feminine temptation. In Pahlavi, the term *Parig*, a kind of fairy, is a wicked fairy or a witch. Fairies try to tempt and lure especially the believers and spoil their faith [10].

The mentioned attribute is also a part of Persian feminine identity and the term "feminine deceitfulness" is used to refer to it in the everyday culture. Having a quick look at the political history in Iran, we can readily see that men have always had an absolute authority and power, and the number of women ruling is so small. And even those women had taken the power just because of the political disturbance in the country. At the level of everyday life, too, the domain of power for women is restricted to the household, though even in this domain, too, men play their management role unquestionably. Therefore, it seems quite obvious that in this condition, to achieve their goals, women either should play tricks or ask for help from metaphysical elements. There is no wonder that magic and witchcraft is more common among women than men. For instance, in everyday culture, women, from the very beginning, try to find a way to have their husbands and their family under control. "In the engagement ceremony, somebody sews the mother. And sister – in-law's tongue with 7 colors of thread while standing behind the bird" [11].

In his negative sense, deceitfulness is accompanied by wickedness. *Jahi*, the devil's daughter and feminine manifestation of the negative face, who is the manifestation of all the wickednesses of women, is the main encouraging

figure to the devil to attack the Ormazd's forces, and thus awakens him from 3000-year unconsciousness. "*Jahi*... sinful *jahi* said to her father, "get up father as I have inflicted so much pain on the holy man and the cow who can't live anymore... I will take away their divine soul, I will torture the water and I will hurt the fire, I harm the plant, I will all the creatures of Ormazd [4].

D. Maternal Love, Good Image of Women in Legend and Mythology

In Lori legends, maternal love and preciousness of motherhood, with the frequency of 94, is the most recurring theme. Of course, the importance of motherhood as a positive feature of women has, without a doubt, to do with the importance of fertility.

One of the common attributes in the human culture is the connection between the woman and the fertility. This is clearly illustrated in the legends. In fact, the most important positive attribute common among women in Lori legends is the motherhood, which is highly respected. However, this positive aspect has a negative counterpart that is stepmother. This kind of encounter between good and bad is evident in all the Lorestan legends. For the foundation of mythical mentality lies on the continuous conflict between Ormazd and the devil (*Ahriman*). This is demonstrated in the legends.

Amordad and *Khordad* are two goddesses (*Amshaspad*) with feminine personality in the Zoroastrian myths. These two are far less important compared with the other four goddesses (*Amshaspad*) whom we mentioned before. *Amordad* is the manifestation of immortality and example of salvation and eternity [6].

While *Khordad* is the manifestation of salvage for humans. These two are often mentioned as pairs in myths and above all are the sign of birth and life. In this material world *Khordad* looks after. The water and *Amordad* take care of the plant [7].

The connection between the goddesses with the water as a sign of fertility and birth along with plant as a sign of life is clearly paid attention to in this part of the myths. These roles can be witnessed for the other Persian goddesses, too. However, *Anahita* and *Sepandarmaz* are the most important ones of all the mythical figures. This is obvious when we see that in the Zoroastrian calendar, the fifth day of *Esfand* which belongs to *Sepandarmaz* is named as "the mother's day" and "the woman's day". In these special days women are spared the household chores and men do the domestic routine instead of them. Hence, the relationship between *Sepandarmaz* and the earth and her connection with fertility is fully understandable.

IV. CONCLUSION

Creation and recreation of identity is a continuous process throughout the history of all nations in which a predictable and understandable pattern can be seen. The concepts that can clearly portray the conceptual distance between "me" and "the other". Although, this process is continuously reproducing, some parts of it such as sexual identity have followed a consistent pattern over time resulting in resemblances across generations, which can be pointed to as

ever-lasting identity.

Persian feminine identity is formed base on underlying mythical and legendary features which have maintained their ties with current Persian society. Despite the fact that the pace of the transitional society has caused significant gaps in this process leading to the recreation of a new sexual identity, the power of Persian myths in creating sexual identity can still be observed. In addition, the tie between the myths and the legends is undeniable. Lorestan legends follow the same pattern as Persian myths in the process of recreation of feminine identity. This tie is significant while we attend to the formation of meaningful structures in legends and hence can verify the hypothesis that there are other myths in the other regions of Iran.

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Sajadpour Farzaneh was born in Mashhad- Iran (1976) and I graduated from Tehran University in 2004 , MS Degree Anthropology. 1991-1995, Bentolhoda High School, Mashha, 1996-2000. Shahid Bahonar Kerman University, Undergraduate degree, Social Sciences . 2001-2004, Tehran University , MS Degree, Anthropology Social Sciences