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## **Recognition of National and Religious Myths in Sohrab Sepehri's "The Traveler": An Investigation on Traditions and Cultural Beliefs**

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### **ABSTRACT**

One of the Iranian contemporary prominent poets is Sohrab Sepehri who his poetry is very famous in theosophy because of the addressing of inner subjectivity difficulties, naturalism, and finding linkage between human beings and nature and God. The aim of this study is to examine, in what manner and for what reason, national and religious myths were delivered into Sepehri's poetry of "the traveler." On one hand, it focuses Sepehri's unconscious mind, and on the other hand, it highlights the link between specified myth and the theosophical origins of presented myths in his poetry. Also, this study clarifies the above-mentioned myths to which nations they have belonged, Iranian or adapted traditional forms of the other nations, in order to manifest their place and period in different cultures, particularly, to analyze the relation of myths to religion, history, and sociology. This article applies a qualitative method for its discussion. The resultant study reveals that the demonstrated construction and interpretation of these myths will emphasize the human beings' life issues.

*Keywords:* Iran, Sohrab Sepehri, the traveler, national and religious myths, theosophy

### **Introduction**

Indeed, literary study is identical with the history of civilization. As a matter of fact, literature is a gate for both manifestation and transmission of traditions from one place to another. The essential gate with its exclusive terminology is carrying constantly the strength of myths and archetypes. Myths are archive of archetypes and one of the oldest traditions including a unique expanded power in which clarifies the reality and the original of existence. They are significant inseparable part of new and old literature having influential transcendent energy on mankind's thought and mind. Doubtless, mythologists have been beginners of literature and art. For that reason, they have an ideological role to teach people how moving things forward on successful management of the affairs for the betterment of their activity in social culture.

However, myth has no rational explanation. It signifies that myth's fundamental life concerning its mythical meaning has been lost by intellectualism. Due to its definition, myth is the symbolic story about creation, gods, angels, saints, heroes, demons and beyond life beings and creatures. (Ismailpur, 1382) In myths, the challenge between any person with himself or in his life is obvious because myths sometimes legitimize events and connect them to the other world in order to benefit metaphysical archetypes. For their enduring and lasting presence and meaningful link, myths have a vital role worth considering in Persian language.

### **National and Religious Myths in Sohrab Sepehri's "The Traveler"**

Due to his plenty journeys, Sepehri is knowledgeable about the myths, the religions, and the culture of different countries. They had an impressive effect on Sepehri that eventually composed mythical concepts in his poetry. National and religious myths in "the traveler" are fixed given from different religions although they are talking secretly to us in a complicated verbal skill that is specially belong to symbols. In this article, myths will be analyzed respectively based on their mentioning in "the traveler."

In theosophical belief, people have to know themselves first before reaching godliness. In the following of that awareness, mankind is the small appearance of the manifestation of God. Without a doubt, man's grief in this world is because of separating from his origin. With insight and awareness, Sepehri was

finding what the reality of life is. He has digressed from the beautiful appearance of life to its hidden interior. He saw himself in a boat that in Indian myths, rescues human being in order to reach to their faraway ideals. "May Agni carry us through all our troubles, through grief as in a boat across the river." (Griffith,1896:53)(the Rig Veda,19)

"At midnight, on the ancient boat of theosophy  
They set sail on the waters of guidance  
And they sail on till the emergence of bewilderment" (Sepehri,1383:26)  
- "I am still on my journey  
I fancy  
There is a boat on the waters of the world  
And I, the passenger of the boat, have been chanting  
The lively song of the ancient mariners  
To the ears of seasons' chinks for thousands of years  
And I am sailing on." (Sepehri,1383:28)

Then, Sepehri has mentioned "Eve" exactly with the same name and meaning of the old myth. According to The Qur'ān, Sūrah Al-Baqarah (The Cow), Adam and his wife were forbidden to approach to "the tree". "O Adam! Dwell you, and your spouse, in the garden, and eat (of the fruits) thereof to your hearts' content where you desire, but do not approach this tree, or you will both be among the wrongdoers." (The Qur'ān, 2:35) "But Satan (tempting them to the forbidden tree despite Our forewarning,) caused them both to deflect therefrom and brought them out of the (happy) state in which they were. And We said, "Go down, (all of you,) (and henceforth you will live a life,) some of you being the enemies of others. There shall be for you on the earth a habitation and provision until an appointed time." (The Qur'ān, 2:36) There is the same believe in Iranian Zoroastrian holy book, too. (Oshidari,1371:249) Sepehri reveals clearly that "Eve" has been deceived.

"Life is  
Eve's one-minute colorful negligence." (Sepehri,1383:34)

In advancing along the road, Sepehri was seeking "the Ronus Rock." In fact, some of the rocks have holy aspect such as Koma made of jade, in Japanese believe. In archaic ethnic groups, some of the rocks, in their natural and original source, were like a god considered as holy beings. For instance, in Asia Minor, Cybele (Kybele) was an originally the Mother Goddess of Nature who was worshipped as a sacred rock. In 204 BC, a temple for Cybele was built by Romans on the Palatine Hill in Rome. Also, in Canaan, James, patriarchal Hebrew, was using that rock as a pillow. (Hall,1383:213) Moreover, in Borhan-e Ghate, "Ronus" rhyming with "Folus" is the name of the rock which allegedly if everyone wears a signet-ring on one's finger, it will never be in sorrow. (Tabrizi,1342:966) However, "runes" is crossed Shamisa's mind taken from Greek alphabet so that it can be engraved on stone and wood. It was customary among Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian people and had religious aspects. (Shamisa,1382:172) In this line of famous poem, Sepehri displays his sadness and sorrow. With nostalgia, he has written a line memorial over the tree.

"Where is the Ronus Rock?  
I come from the vicinity of a tree  
On whose bark the plain hands of nostalgia  
Had engraved:  
"In the memory of a nostalgic feeling." (Sepehri,1383:36,38)

Subsequently, Sepehri has expressed one of the most tragic episodes of The Shahnameh (The Book of Kings), Sohrab who is the outcome of a simple love between Rostam and Tahmineh, daughter of the Turanian king of Samangan in Azerbaijan. According to The Shahnameh, on the third days of the wrestling between unknown father and son, Rostam gained the advantage and stabbed Sohrab's side. He declared that Rostam, his father, would take revenge of his death, and showed an onyx to Rostam. When Rostam saw and recognized the onyx, the same as he had given to Tahmineh to bind on the arm of any son. However, there

was no hope. Goodarz has been sent to Kai Kawous in order to bring Antidote for Sohrab, but he had flinty heart. Then, Rostam returned to get Antidote maybe Sohrab would have healed. However, Rostam was informed that Sohrab was died. (Ferdowsi, The Shahnameh, Rostam and Sohrab) The proverb “After death the doctor” coming from that episode. Sepehri states miserably that tragedy. He asked wine to reduce his grief arising from the epic which is related to history of Creation of the world and the first day of Creation of everything. For this reason, we can say that his sorrow is eternal and never-ending.

“Pass the wine around  
One should haste:  
I come from a journey in an epic,  
And I know  
By heart  
All the legend of “**Sohrab and the Antidote**.” (Sepehri,1383:38)

However, Sepehri’s grief did not leave him, but directed him to another land, instead. At that time, he has pointed out “Psalms” of Dawud known as David and his lyre playing. According to Psalms, “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yes, we wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows in its midst, we hung up our harps. For there, those who led us captive asked us for songs. Those who tormented us demanded songs of joy: “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How can we sing Yahweh’s song in a foreign land?” (Holy Bible, Psalm 137) Sepehri has entirely understood their beleaguered feeling, and has emotionally imagined the same situation for himself even he has listened their crying and the voice of their lyres’ swinging.

“And once, under the sky of “Psalms”  
On the journey at the banks of Babylon River  
When I came to  
There was no melody of the “lyre”  
When I listened carefully, I could hear someone weeping  
And few impatient lyres  
Were swinging on the wet boughs of the weeping willow.” (Sepehri,1383:40)

Soon after, Sepehri has identified the Prophet Jeremiah (Iirmiya), the weeping prophet, the messenger of the promising of Christians, who preached in Jerusalem and had prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem. His mission was to prevent people of doing many sins. However, he was imprisoned by king Zedekiah until Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian army in 587 BC. The Book of Jeremiah, Lamentations, in Jewish Bible consists of a collection of poetic laments about the fall of Jerusalem. (Holy Bible, Lamentations) Hopelessly, Sepehri has talked about the futility of the world. He found out the same perception in “Ecclesiastes” in Hebrew Bible belong to son of David, too.

“On the route of the journey, the pious Christian monks  
Pointed towards  
The silent canvas of  
“The Prophet Jeremiah”  
And I read “Ecclesiastes” loudly” (Sepehri,1383:40)

Afterward, on his way, Sepehri has reviewed “world papers.” Then, he has interpreted the world differently. Here, he put emphasize on the philosophy of Hinduism about the River Ganges. His attention is to bath not only the body but the inside. In Indian myths, Ganga is the River Goddess of the River Ganges having its source in heaven. The sacred river is worshiped by millions Hindus who take a bath in the river for doing religious practices. They believe that bathing in the river causes the purifying and the remission of sins. In fact, there was a common belief in the most ancient cultures that the origin of life is in the waters. (Campbell,1383:153)

Besides, after ten years of rigorous self-discipline in Himalayas Mountains, Siddhartha Gautama moved from Sarnath Road to Varanasi known as Banaras, a city on the banks of the river. “The Buddha sat

under the Bodhi tree and vowed not to get up anything until he was enlightened.” (The Complete Book of Buddha’s Lists-Explained, Right Effort:46) After that, he went to Banaras and delivered the four evolutionary stages of religion including devotion, discipline, tranquility, and understanding (wisdom). By means of the philosophy of the innovative outlook, Sepehri has put the dust of the habits away, and has newly viewed the world. By looking at Buddha’s statues with the ornamental ears, he has described the secret and the truth of Buddha for Varanasi’s girls.

“I am the interpreter of the sparrows of the valley of “Ganges”  
And I have interpreted the mystic signed earrings  
Of Tibet to the ornamentless ears of Banarass girls  
Alongside the Saranat Road.” (Sepehri,1383:50)

Followed by his feeling, Sepehri has talked about hymns of “the Vedas”. The Vedas is Hinduism’s ancient holy book including the four large canonical Vedas in Sanskrit related to 1200 BCE, The Rig Veda, The Yajur Veda, The Sama Veda, and The Atharva Veda. Among the Vedic texts, The Rig Veda is the oldest historical monument, a more credit-worthy text consist of the hymns on praise and controversy between gods and the legendary various beings. (Shayegān,1362:44) In terms of linguistic and culture, The Rig Veda is very similar to Iranian Avesta, the sacred book contains five books: the Yasna (including the Gathas), Visperad, Vendidad, Yashts, and Khordeh Avesta. Also, Sepehri has pointed to the Vedic Fire Ceremony of Hindus. The ritual of yanji known as havan, homa or Agnihorta, first, begins with reciting hymns of The Atharva Veda, then, The Rig Veda and The Sama Veda. Finally, they place the gifts into the sacred fire (Agni, the fire God). (Hezareh,1383:97-98)

“O morning hymns of “the Vedas”!  
Pull all the weights of freshness on my shoulders  
Since I am  
Desirous to talk” (Sepehri,1383:50)

At the same time as Sepehri’s feeling was on top of the world eagerly to talk, he has illustrated Prophet Moses, via addressing “Mount Sinai”. According to The Qur’ān, Sūrah Ṭā. Hā, “Has the report of Moses come to you...when he saw a fire, and so said to his family: “Wait here! Indeed I perceive a fire far off. Perhaps I can bring you a burning brand from it, or find guidance by the fire.” Then when he came near to it, he was called by name: “O Moses! “Indeed it is I, I am your Lord. So take off your sandals, for you are in the sacred valley of Tuwā.” (The Qur’ān, 20:9-13) Also, According to The Qur’ān, Sūrah Maryam (Mary), Moses, Kalimullah, was a prominent messenger who talked to God (Allah in Islam). “We called out to him from the right side of Mount Sinai, and drew him close for communication.” (The Qur’ān, 19:52) Sepehri, is a lonely traveler who has passed along Mount Sinai. He wishes to be addressed by the actual voice through the olive trees of Palestine’s mountains like the same voice that is called Moses in Mount of Sinai.

“O all olive trees of Palestine!  
Address to me all the abundance of your shades  
To this lone traveler who has come  
From the journey around Mount Sinai  
And is impatient of the heat of “talk”” (Sepehri,1383:50)

In the following, Sepehri has pointed out the birth of Zoroastrians’ the promised who will advert after thousands year shining the earth by righteousness. As said by the Avesta, the sacred Zoroastrians book, a world saviour, was an Iranian prophet who incredibly had three sons who have been born after the prophet’s death. In dictionary of the legends, Saošyant, the promised of Zoroastrians, is Zoroaster’s son who will be born at the beginning of Judgment Day. His mission is to make the dead rise being ready for everlasting life which would be full of brightness. (Yahaghi,1369:260) According to The Avesta, the seeds of the prophet are preserved in the Lake Kāsava known as Kaşaoya, Hamun Lake. “At the appointed time, it will be united again with a maternal womb: 99,999 Fravashis of the faithful watch over it, lest the fiends destroy it.” (The Zend-Avesta, Bund. XXXIII; Eznik, Yast XIII,61;vendīdād XIX,5) Based on Zoroastrians’ belief, a virgin girl will

take a bath in this lake and become pregnant with a child by the prophet. She will give birth to a son, Astvat.ərəta who represents justice and fairness. “Astvat.ərəta will be Saošyant, the Saviour who will bring about Frašō.kərəti, smiting “daēvas and men”.” (Boyce,1975:282) Eventually, in the final battle with evil, Saošyant will be miraculously won. Here, Sepehri was waiting for revival, the restoration of happiness for the world and human beings!

“At the banks of “Hamun”, one still may hear:  
 -Evil has contaminated the earth  
 -One thousand years passed  
 -No one has heard the wash of a bathing  
 And no water has reflected the figure of a maiden” (Sepehri,1383:52,54)

In his halfway of journey, Sepehri has pointed up the River Jumna known as Yamuna which is one of the seventh sacred rivers in Hinduism. The source of the River Jumna is Himalayas Mountains, Yamunotri. As the largest branch of the River Ganges, the River Jumna has especially clear transparent with good quality water that connects to the River Ganges in Allahabad. The River Jumna is one of the Indians mythical rivers holding onto a legend of a girl and a boy within a fish, nymph. In the Indian Golden Age, perhaps 400 B.C., King Vasu overcame by a crisis while he was hunting. He thought that he must keep his seeds. Therefore, he gathered them up in a leaf and called a hawk to send to his wife, “who is in her season.” On the way, another hawk came down to the leaf and the seeds fell into the River Jumna. The seeds were “immediately swallowed by a fish, who was actually a nymph under enchantment.” After ten months, a boy and a girl were astonishingly found inside the fish by a fisherman. (Campbell,1962:327-329)

Here, the interpretation of Sepehri is different from the appearance. He has evidently seen the picture of Taj Mahal in the clear water of the River Jumna. However, his vast viewpoint has actually discovered the wonderful power of this river which is brought about two mankind’s life in the peak of death and destruction. Sepehri, even deeper than the myth, says that the real bliss life is after death. He believes that only a small spark is enough to light the inner darkness. Hence, with escape from darkness, man will be full of brightness looking at the life newly and profoundly.

“On the half way of the journey, on the coast of “Jumna”  
 I was sitting  
 Looking at the reflection of “Taj Mahal” in water:  
 The marble constancy of elixir moments  
 And the protrusion of the volume of life in death  
 Lo! Two large wings  
 Are traveling towards the edge of water’s spirit  
 There are some strange sparks next to the arms  
 Come and light the darkness of perception  
 One hint only suffices:” (Sepehri,1383:54)

Furthermore, Sepehri has said that for gaining access to real life, a particle of light can destroy darkness as it can be made a sound by a pebble on the rock of “Maghar”. According to Greek myths, in ancient Greek City-State Megara, there is a rock that if someone hit it with a gravel or small stone, sound is heard exactly like a lyre. Allegedly, the reason is that Apollo, Greek god of music playing a golden lyre, laid down his lyre on that once. (Cambridge University Press,2012:64) As a result, the power of human being’s mind and thought is able to ruin the darkness.

“Life is a tender stroke  
 On the rock of “Maghar”.” (Sepehri,1383:54)

In the end of his traveling, one more time, Sepehri has affirmed the myth of man’s creation rooted in ancient myths. Indeed, Totem or spirit-being is related to Neolithic period. Totemism is one of the ancient phenomenon of mankind believed in which each man has a spiritual connection with a Plant Totem named Rhubarb known as Ribas, a species from polygonaceous family. In Aryans’ beliefs, the father and the mother

of mankind, Mashya and Mashyana created from Ribas. In Zoroastrian creation myth, Gayōmart known as Keyumars, the progenitor of mankind is the first man. In the time of his death, two drops of his semen fell to the ground that was fertilized by the sun and was kept in the soil. After forty years, a plant like two attached rhubarbs grew in the Month Mehr (the Day of Mehregan). Afterward, that plant changed into two human beings named Mashya and Mashyana, who their stature and facial was the same as each other. After fifty years, they married to each other, and after nine months, a pair of child, a male and a female, were born from them. Then, seven pair of girl and boy were born from the first pair accordingly. (Oshidari,1371:435,436). Also, there is the same belief in Bundahishn, Zoroastrian Cosmogony, about Primal Creation.

“We thought  
We were floating  
Amidst the mythical context of Ribas convulsion  
And that few seconds of negligence  
Caused our Being.” (Sepehri,1383:58)

Finally, Sepehri has discovered the secret of actual life. His only request was:

“And show me  
The presence of a tender “Naught”.” (Sepehri,1383:64)

### **The Overall Analysis on “the traveler”**

With focusing on the myths, Sepehri’s target is to find the reality of the world. In particular, he used Indian, Greek, and the Far East myths more than Iranian myths. The worth considering point in Sepehri’s poetical viewpoint is that although the myths referring to prehistory time, he believes in fresh look at objects like Krishnamurti’s approach, Indian mystic philosopher. Sepehri makes the myths alive and dynamic in the mind of man. Sepehri attempts to identify the world, and to realize the right and the secret of eternal life. He is a traveler who passes through the material world in order to attain his ideal world. In his poetry of “the traveler”, Sepehri starts from a mental journey, and then he accomplishes to a global journey.

“The traveler” is the symbol of a mankind in the terrestrial world that never stops moving from the creation and the beginning of birth until the end of life, and even continues to the end of world, too. The traveler of Sepehri does not entirely stop anywhere. He is a man who goes everywhere in the traveling, and only settles for a short time somewhere, and then continues to his traveling, again. (Torabi,1382:155) Sepehri’s spiritual travel is internal. He wants to gain the inner truth of things through essence and nature of objects and elements of nature. Actually, he wants to achieve the secret of life relating to truth and creator via physical journey and unified with the essence of nature. Sepehri’s spiritual path is scientific following founded on knowledge and experience. Hence, his poem’s process introduces his spiritual progression.

### **Conclusion**

Literature, particularly in its theosophical field, plays an essential role in transmission of traditions. In highlighting history, literature, religion, art and culture of any nation, myths’ role is observable. In Sepehri’s “the traveler”, one of the most effective elements which is theosophy, is revealed. Investigation on Sepehri’s mythical frame of mind enlightens his worldview. His mythical world is alive and sensible considered as human beings’ one. By applying myths, Sepehri’s purpose originates from his profound viewpoint to know God, himself, and the environment around. With his mythical expression, he propounds life’s issues. Sepehri looked out to internal layer of myths more than their external shell. The expansion of Sepehri’s myths is significantly large. It can be said that there is an interdependency correlation between the myths and his poems. In “the traveler”, a huge number of myths, notably seventeen national and religious myths, have become alive. Beyond doubt, Sepehri’s vast perspective is an absolute practice of traditions. Invocation of God by the literary way influences tremendously on people and the society. As a basic linkage, majority of Iranians are traditional and religious whereby they could be easily controlled through a religious message. In Iranian culture, religion has the antiquity for thousand years. People have been influenced through myths even in modernity development time because they are part of generation’s religious beliefs. Impressively, Sepehri’s poems have been translated into various languages. Thus, the legacy of his feelings, values, and ideas is smoothly transferring to the other nations and cultures. By a long way, globalization ultimately will pave the

way for an important development in modern poetry towards the fundamental instrument of transition of traditions to the future while the practices of them display patterns of theosophical setting. The wondering of their advent and function, myths' historical flowing travel and transmission have been smoothed and occurred.

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