

Ecocriticism and Persian and Greek Myths about the Origin of Fire

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Abstract: In his article "Ecocriticism and Persian and Greek Myths about the Origin of Fire" Massih Zekavat argues that some contemporary ecological biases are rooted in ancient thought. Further, Zekavat argues that the study of mythology is relevant to the understanding of culture and ecology thus assisting ecocriticism. The investigation of man/woman, culture/nature, and human/nature binary oppositions conveys that Greek and Persian myths are mostly anthropocentric and androcentric and associate fire with the development of culture. Zekavat postulates that one way to revise contemporary ecological conceptions is to study myths to shed light on the mind and context of their creators and believers, their representation of natural phenomena, and their continuous impact on future generations through their adaptive and appropriative resonances in cultural production.

Massih ZEKAVAT

Ecocriticism and Persian and Greek Myths about the Origin of Fire

Ancient civilizations did not suffer from ecological crises at least not in the same way as we do today. Thus most ecocritical readings have been concerned with modern works, more specifically, from the time of industrial revolution and its aftermath. This is mainly because environmental damage accelerated since modernity. I posit that today's ecological urgency is rooted in biases we have inherited from our ancestors. As Briar Wood observes, "myths have long been understood to perform the social and cultural function of instructing people in acceptable or improper behavior and in performing the task of fusing seemingly impossibly contradictory interpretations of the world" (119). Thus by studying myths we can explicate some of these long-standing biases. As James G. Frazer remarked in 1930, "Of all human inventions the discovery of the method of kindling fire has probably been the most momentous and far-reaching ... while myths never explain the facts which they attempt to elucidate, they incidentally throw light on the mental condition of the men who invented or believed them; and, after all, the mind of man is not less worthy of investigation than the phenomena of nature, from which, indeed, it cannot be ultimately discriminated" (*Myths* 1). Investigating myths of the origin of fire across temporal and cultural boundaries reveals some similarities with regard to ecological attitudes. Such common properties can be explained as the result of similarities in ecological biases rather than a direct influence between Greek and Persian cultures. The explication of these biases conveys that mostly they do not offer working resolutions for contemporary concerns and can no longer contribute to human and non-human sustenance.

One way to revise our ecological conceptions and abolish anthropocentrism, therefore, is to study myths in order to shed light on the mind and context of their creators and believers, their representation of natural phenomena, as well as their continuous impact on future generations through their resonances in various cultural produce: "myths are necessary imaginings, exemplary stories which help our species to make sense of its place in the world. Myths endure so long as they perform helpful work" (Bate 25-26). Thus, the study of myths can discover mythologies' importance for today and by deconstructive readings it provides the possibility of revision and subversion of their unhelpful aspects. This is especially significant, because "myths are constructed on the basis of a certain logicity of tangible qualities which makes no clear-cut distinction between subjective states and properties of the cosmos. Nevertheless it must not be forgotten that such a distinction has corresponded, and to a lesser extent still corresponds, to a particular stage in the development of scientific knowledge—a stage that in theory, if not in actual fact, is doomed to disappear. In this respect, mythological thought is not prescientific; it should be seen rather as an anticipation of the future state of science, whose past development and present trend show that it has always been progressing in the same direction" (Lévi-Strauss 240).

Ancient myths still are being adapted, appropriated, and reread. And reciprocal construction governs the relationship between myth and human mind (see, e.g., Lévi-Strauss 341). Therefore, ancient myths partly construct some of our contemporary conceptions including that of nature. Nature has always been important in mythology, and fire has been significantly prominent. Thus while agriculture was a significant step forward for human civilization, its development was impossible without the discovery of metals, which, in their turn, required the discovery of fire. Besides air, water, and earth, fire is one of the four constitutive elements of the universe in the Ptolemaic system. As for its vital role in the development of civilization, it features a distinct status in the mythology and folklore of different peoples (Frazer, *Myths* 1-2). Persian and Greek mythological treatments of nature including fire bear ancient concepts and perceptions on what we study today in ecocriticism and thus myths are relevant to the field (on this, see also, e.g., Callahan; Da Silva; Wrede). One instance of such relevance is the use of mythology in the study of scientific nomenclature as Jennifer C. Wheat shows and this suggests that the study of myth and folklore can open new vistas toward a deeper understanding of the roots of ecological problems and toward the establishment of a more ecocentric culture.

There is no consensus in scholarship about the definition of myth, although we can agree that "all human communities have myths of origin, stories which serve both to invent a past which is necessary to make sense of the present and to establish a narrative of humankind's uniqueness and apartness

from the rest of nature" (Bate 26). Robert Oden enumerates several major theories of myth and several of these theories are useful for ecocritical thought and argumentation in which in addition to scientific data also cultural data are included (for a similar argument see, e.g., Náray-Szabó <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2316>>). The first of Oden's theories is that mythology is a proto-science: "myths are immature science" (Oden 113), the second theory is the perspective of human-nature relationship, and a third theory is explanations of natural phenomena. Altogether, theories of myth can serve the development of a constructive human and nature relationship in which humanity's appreciation of nature is a principal point. Therefore, besides resorting to science, the study of myth can open up new vistas in the field of ecocriticism. On the other hand, some people contend that myth was a device for "primitive" people to conquer nature (see Luke 12-13) and this puts myth on par with modern science and technology in that both attempt to facilitate homo sapiens with a mastery over nature and the environment. Contrary to this view, the study of myth I propose is one where the intention is to participate with phenomena, not explain them (see Oden 114-15). This attitude is the antithesis of anthropocentrism which views nature only in terms of its instrumental value for human beings. If humanity aims to participate with natural phenomena instead of mastering them, then culture will not longer be conceived of as opposing nature.

In the context of myth and nature and culture, Claude Lévi-Strauss was one of the first to elaborate on the significance of culture and nature binary opposition in fire myths and he wrote that "the raw/cooked axis is characteristic of culture; the fresh/decayed one of nature, since cooking brings about the cultural transformation of the raw, just as putrefaction is its natural transformation" (142). In *The Raw and the Cooked*, Lévi-Strauss implies that the concept of raw/cooked and its relation with myths concern the origin of fire and he concludes that myths dealing with the origin of fire "contrast nature with culture and even with society" (169). Further, Alan Beakley notes Lévi-Strauss's observation that humans are interested in animals mainly because of their interest in meaning and categorization. He posits that mythology represents the ultimate instance of quest for meaning and categorization. For Beakley, "mythology ... is the vehicle for human self-realization of the structure of the mind, as the expression of the human mind reflecting upon its own structures" (138). But the self-reflexive quality of the mind and its attempt toward intellect alienate it from the natural world. This paradox, Lévi-Strauss believes, separates humans from animals (see Bleakley 138). Therefore, human beings are interested in animals so far as it serves to further develop their mind and intellect. Many agree with Lévi-Strauss over the significance of nature/culture dichotomy. Fredrick Turner, for instance, argues that "one might almost categorize societies, in a way that would nicely cut across the usual economic, technological, and historical distinctions, solely by the content of their nature/culture distinction" (41). Within natural phenomena fire has been so vital in human life that different qualities and figures have been attached to it. For example, in Greek mythology the yearning for liberty, gods determine the course of life and the story of fire's origin is closely associated with this and in Persian mythology fire is associated with law, order, and the harnessing nature. This perception—particularly with regard to an ecocritical approach to culture—is expressed by David Palumbo-Liu, for instance, who recurses to Margaret Mead's thought to map a "new shared common culture" based nature (51). And the discovery of fire, as the result of a constructive employment of natural resources toward our sustenance, is one such commonality. It is noteworthy that in mythology fire is also closely associated with creation.

Among natural phenomena the sun and fire have been in a prominent position in the mythology of several cultures and now I turn to fire in Greek and Persian mythologies in order to explore its ecocritical implications. Fire is prominent as a motif in Greek mythology: for example, Zeus uses thunderbolt as his weapon, Apollo is the Healer, god of Light and god of Truth, and he is also kind to immortals teaching them to cure diseases and showing them the ways they can make peace with gods. In Greek mythology two other gods are related to fire: Hephaestus, god of fire, is an immortal smith who provides armor and other artifacts for gods and volcanoes and volcanic eruptions are associated with him and Hestia is the last of the twelve major Olympians associated with fire: she is the goddess of the hearth, hence domestic fire symbolizing family and home. Furthermore, in ancient Greek, every state had its Prytaneum (sacred to Hestia) that featured a common hearth in which fire burned perpetually for the city (see Frazer, "Prytaneum" 146). Frazer suggests that "the prytanis was anciently the king or perhaps rather the chief or headman of a petty independent town and that the prytaneum was his

house" (147). In addition, when a new residence was to be established, fire was taken from the prytaeum's hearth to kindle the fire of the newly established place (Frazer, "Prytaeum" 152).

In Greek mythology, the noble status of fire is not restricted to immortals. Prometheus, a Titan who took side with Zeus when he rebelled against Kronos to dethrone him, first introduces fire to mortals. According to one version of the myth of creation, Zeus obliges Prometheus and his brother, Epimetheus to create the mortal race. Epimetheus, whose name denotes after-thought, consumes all the best gifts in the creation of animals. When it comes to the creation of human beings, desperate, he turns to Prometheus who grants humanity the same upright figure from which gods also benefit (see Hamilton 85-87). Moreover, he brings a flame of the heavenly fire in a stalk of fennel to humanity on earth, a superior protection compared with those granted to animals (40-41). Also, by cheating Zeus, he ensures that the mortals will get the best share of the sacrifices. Preparing a pile of bones covered with shiny fat, Prometheus asks Zeus to choose between this and the meat of the sacrifice. Zeus naively chooses the shiny heap (see Hamilton 39-40). This swindle alongside with the theft of fire enrage Zeus who resolves to avenge Prometheus and humanity. Creation of Pandora, the first woman and the predecessor of the female race, is his revenge on humanity. According to one account, the attractive Pandora is created with a wicked nature and provided with flamboyant gifts from all gods as an affliction for men (see Hamilton 41-42, 59). According to another, it is not her wicked nature but her curiosity which brings plight on humanity. Gods present her with a jar filled with all detriments and prohibit her from opening it. But, because of her curiosity, she opens it and lets all that harm loose (see Hamilton 87-88; Hesiod 58-60). The punishment that Prometheus is inflicted with is even direr and Zeus condemns him to be nailed (or chained) to a rock in Caucasus. Everyday a bird of prey tears his liver (or heart), which recovers by night, only to be devoured again tomorrow (Hesiod 39). According to Plato, however, Prometheus steals fire from Hephaestus and Athena. Gods create all creatures "underneath the ground, compounding their bodies out of earth and fire" (Frazer, *Myths* 193). The task of equipping them before their ascent to the surface of the ground is assigned to Prometheus and Epimetheus. But Epimetheus endows all available gifts upon animals. To compensate for Epimetheus's thoughtlessness, Prometheus decides to bestow fire on humanity. But since he cannot penetrate Zeus's heavily guarded citadel, he stealthily enters Hephaestus and Athena's workshop and steals fire from Hephaestus and craftsmanship from Athena (Frazer, *Myths* 193-94).

Prometheus is the first liberator and the first savior. He creates humanity and endows them as their benefactor with noble and exquisite gifts. Consequently, he undergoes a great affliction for the sacrifices he makes. The domestication of fire widened the gap between the animals and humans. As Laina Farhat observes, "the Greek myth of Prometheus ... equates fire with the beginnings of human intellect, enlightenment, and power" (300; see also Goudsblom). But it is not just fire: Prometheus is the one who teaches people agriculture, the domestication of animals, and the use of herbs as medicaments (see Bolton 38). In classical Athens, he is the patron of potters (pottery is a key technology aiding the development of culture). During the passage of time, his figure is actually fetishized. Aeschylus ascribes many human capabilities and talents, including "wisdom," as Prometheus's gifts of benevolence (335-38). This culminates in the assertion that, "All human culture comes from Prometheus" (Aeschylus 338). Similarly, a "passage in Diodorus mentions Prometheus as the inventor of the flint-stone—an euhemeristic explanation of the myth. Likewise, Prometheus is characterized as the father of philosophy by Theophrastus, the inventor of gymnastics by Philostratus, or the first man to discover how to store and carry fire in a fennel stalk, or to teach men to wear rings on their fingers, by Pliny" (Raggio 50).

As in Greek mythology, fire has a distinct standing among the mythical figures and tales in Persian mythology associated with divinity and goodness (see, e.g., Amoozgar; Christensen, *L'Iran*). Creation takes place over four tri-millennium periods: during the first tri-millennium, Ahūra-Mazdā undertakes the celestial creation. It is when the Amshāspands and later other divinities are created. When Ahrīman (the devil's counterpart) discerns the ray of creation, he determines to ruin it. But he is outwitted by the ultimate wisdom of Ahūra-Mazdā and becomes unconscious for the next three thousand years. That is when prototypes of humans and animals are created. In the end of the second trimillennium period demonic forces awaken Ahrīman and encourage him for a second assault and they attack the world as the result of which fire is polluted with smoke. Finally, the last trimillennium period begins with Zarathustra's birth and ends with Farishgard (the renewal of the world toward perfection). The

main ingredient for creation is fire and ancient Persian texts maintain that fire is created from thought or borderless light (see Bahār). One of the gods—Arta-Vahishta (also Asha-Vahishta and Urdibihisht) whose name means the best of truth and decency and he stands for law and order of the universe in both life and hereafter—is the most important of the six Amshāspands (divine immortals) and he undertakes the creation of fire on earth. Noon belongs to him and Surūsh and Āzar and Bahrām are among his allies. Fire represents him in this world. Further, Mithra is the god of oath and covenant born with a dagger and a torch, an association with the sun: he moves with the sun from the east to the west and at the close of the day returns to earth. He never sleeps because he is always busy observing pledges.

Other figures in Persian mythology which are relevant for ecocritical perspectives include Tīsh-tariya, the god of water and hence associated with rain. During the first assault of Ahrīman, it is Tīsh-tariya who purges the world from all poison and harmful animals. That is when he faces the terrifying Apvash, the demon of drought. At first, Apvash is more powerful and the god of rain is defeated. As the result, drought dominates the world. Then, Tīsh-tariya pleads with Ahūra-Mazdā for help. With the help of Ahūra-Mazdā, he defeats Apvash and his ally Spanjarvash. Tīsh-tariya hits the Vazishta, the fire in the clouds. Vazishta enrages, consequently Spanjarvash dies of fear. Further, Bahrām is the god of war and his name means the defeater of all resistance and he is the ever-victorious armor-bearer of the gods. The most important fire in rituals in Zoroastrianism belongs to him. Surūsh is the protector of fire. His name denotes order and subservience. He is the first of Ahūra-Mazdā's creations which worship him. Ātash is the son of Ahūra-Mazdā and one of the mythical stories about him is the account of his war with Azhīdahāk. Azhīdahāk attacks to obtain the Firah-i Īzadī, the godly Firah (essence). Azhīdahāk threatens that he will not let the fire burn on earth. On the other hand, Ātash threatens to burn him severely. Consequently, Azhīdahāk surrenders.

Another important myth in Persian culture is that of Hūshang who was the first king and established government and kingdom and his brother Vīgard established agriculture (see Christensen, *The Epics*). Hūshang means one who provides and bestows good lodgings. He is referred to as Paradāta, that is the first one assigned for governing. His appellation is Pīshdād which means the one who established law for the first time. According to Firdawsī, Hūshang ruled justly and constructively, he discovered iron, and set out to devise different metal tools. Then, he directed water toward the inland regions where water resources were not available. This brought comfort to people who could henceforth cultivate the land. Hūshang is also credited for initiating the breeding of domestic animals and tanning leather and he is also the discoverer of fire (see Christensen, *The Epics*). Once, Hūshang, accompanied by a retinue, was walking in a mountainous area when they came up to something fast, long and black. Its eyes were as crimson as blood and smoke came out of its mouth. Hūshang picks up a stone and throws it toward the serpent, but that stone hits another one and the serpent flies away. Consequently, a nearby bush catches fire and Hūshang thanks God for this blessing. It is believed that the Sadih festivity (held on the evening and night of 24 January) commemorates this event (see Christensen, *The Epics*). And there is also a less well known account of the origin of fire. According to the narrative of *Bundahish* it was Mashya and Mashyāna who first made fire (see Bahār). They are the first human couple born in form of a rhubarb clump who are later transformed into human beings. They fall from the grace when they falsely ascribe creation to Ahrīman. *Bundahish* asserts that gods guided them to choose some firewood that could easily be lit. They first lit the thinner twigs and then blew it to kindle the first fire (see Christensen, *The Epics*).

The culture/nature binary opposition can also be traced in Greek and Persian myths to the origin of fire. Hestia's fire should be carried to the new site from an already founded prytaneum in order to establish a new residence. In other words, for a natural space to be turned into a residential place, an element of culture should first be imported from an already established center. Also, fire is superior to all the natural gifts in Greek mythology. Epimetheus's gifts to animals are not comparable to Prometheus's gift to humanity which serves to distinguish them from all other species. The culture/nature bipolarity is also clear in the events around the figure of Prometheus. Being the embodiment of culture and civilization, he is in conflict with natural forces like the cliff, the sea, and the eagle. Similarly, fire is associated with rationality in the Persian account and it is related to order, law, and government. In Greek mythology Prometheus is the one who makes civil life possible. He is the creator of humanity and their liberator. As fire serves to distinguish human beings from other species, the fire myth clearly

has a social function. In the Persian tradition, the myth even goes as far as making a quasi-national identity by its emphasis on kingdom. Fire's nobility and its connotations persuade one that its discoverer really deserves to rule. In this way, it legitimates kingly rights. So it is not incidental that the first king views a serpent as a threat and attempts to master it. Therefore, fire both serves and connotes the cause of culture.

However, the distinction between nature and culture is not definite. Their relationship is not actually that of opposition, but that of interconnection. Bleakley argues that "the logical properties afforded by the environment offered a model for differentiation, assimilated as structures of consciousness, and then projected as a cultural order, a differentiated society, such as the establishment of kinship patterns" (137). To put it in other words, consciousness and society are structured after the model put forward by the environment. Of course, he does not deny the underlying logic of differentiation, but instead of seeing it merely as ruling the relationship between nature and culture, Bleakley underscores how this logic is duplicated to construct individual subjects and societal structures. Therefore, culture follows rather than opposes the environment. William Rueckert also acknowledges the natural construction of culture and society. But he also detects the cause of their uneasy relationship: "culture—one of our great achievements wherever we have gone—has often fed like a great predator and parasite upon nature and never entered into a reciprocating energy-transfer, into a recycling relationship with the biosphere. In fact, one of the most common antinomies in the human mind is between culture/civilization and nature/wilderness" (119). Thus Rueckert advocates a mutual relationship between nature and culture to be substituted for their opposition. Similarly, Donna J. Haraway argues that "there is only the chance for getting on together with some grace. The Great Divides of animal/human, nature/culture, organic/technical, and wild/domestic flatten into mundane differences—the kinds that have consequences and demand respect and response—rather than rising to sublime and final ends" (15). Instead, Haraway advocates the notion of naturecultures.

However, as we have seen Persian and Greek fire myths do not readily support such subversion. Besides the other manifestations of culture/nature already discussed, most deities (e.g., Apollo, Hephaestus, Athena, Hestia, Urdībihisht, Bahrām, Surūsh), as well as human beings associated with fire are also associated with culture and technology. For example, Zeus was god of the polis, Apollo the god of medicine, and Hephaestus was god of the forge, all elements of culture. Zeus, Apollo, Hephaestus, Mihr, and Tishtar, on the other hand, are associated with fire and concurrently with nature. Thus, the closer association of fire with culture and wisdom rather than nature and emotion renders these myths both androcentric and anthropocentric. But in order to maintain the culture/nature binary opposition, it is necessary for humanity to dominate nature. In other words, for the privileged position of culture to be upheld, its main agents—human beings—should dominate over natural elements and hence the binary opposition human/nature. One way of asserting such dominance is by modifying nature, another is by harnessing it. Changing humans' position to an upright one, building houses, metal craftsmanship, and slaughtering animals are some of the ways through which nature is modified in these myths and the domestication of animals and redirecting water for irrigation are also among the ways through which humanity has harnessed nature. Human beings are depicted as agents and stewards who employ nature for their own ends. The direct result of human/nature is anthropocentrism that privileges *homo sapiens* and their interests over other species.

Although it cannot be called ecocentric, Greek mythology does not insist on human's stewardship as much as the Persian myth. This is mainly because human beings occupy a pivotal position in the Persian myth while the Greek account is populated with supernatural agents. The heavenly part of both myths rarely supports an ecocentric standpoint for divinities are the focus of attention and it is their will that matters. Although gods are associated with and employ natural elements, there is not a specifically ecocentric (or biocentric) perspective in this relationship. Prometheus's cheating Zeus over his share of sacrifices, for instance, conveys that animals are not favored in their own right; rather, they are used to please gods and only sustain human beings. The black serpent in the Persian myth and the fact that Hūshang tries to kill it while it is actually he who has intruded into its territory underlines both the anthropocentric perspective of the myth, as well as nature's threatening Otherness. Hence I posit that the instrumental value allotted to nature in these myths also emphasizes their prevalent anthropocentrism. Nature is valued so far as it meets the needs of (im)mortals: thunderbolt is significant as it serves Zeus and volcanoes as they provide gods with armor. As Greg Garrard notes,

"Both Judaeo-Christian and Graeco-Roman traditions imagine a divinely order of nature, and find proof in the remarkable fitness of the Earth as a habitat for its various species" (62). Nature has a similar instrumental value in the Persian myth: rain is used as a weapon to defeat Ahrīman and to kill harmful animals. Animals, moreover, are to be domesticated and bred by human beings. For example, the black serpent that Hūshang encounters is the embodiment of terror and evil and that is why it has to be killed by a king.

In conclusion, while the Greek mythology seems to be a more imaginative one, the Persian one is a more rational one. According to *Bundahish*, creation necessitates wisdom in Persian (see Bahār 38). Zoroastrianism is basically a rational religion and its understanding of the universe is affected by reason and philosophy (see Hinnells). In the Greek tradition, gods' and goddesses' irrational passions and rivalries motivate most of what happens while in Persian mythology Ahūrā Mazda is a rational being who has a reason behind all he does (see Hinnells) and the divine and the domestic are not separated in Persian mythology. However, the two mythologies manifest various similarities as well. There are two major positions which account for the similarities found in the mythology (including folktales, legends, and the like) of these two different cultures. One assumption is monogenesis according to which a myth originates in a particular place and culture and, as the result of diffusion, finds its way into other cultures and places. Secondly, polygenesis which assumes that different myths are developed separately in different cultures without any direct or indirect influence involved (see Dundes 54). But because the underling systems which give rise to myths are similar, the end result does also manifest similarities. In other words, similar psychic or social structures give rise to similar myths and ecological biases are among these similarities.

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