

INVOKED GREAT MOTHERS AND SOCIONATIONAL REBIRTH: COMPARATIVE MYTHOPOESIS OF HEANEY AND AL-SAYYĀB

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The distinctive imaginative narratives, characters, and events of ancient myths and legends have furnished many writers with inspiration for their literary treatment of major social, national, and political concerns. Old myths about deities such as Gaia, Ishtar, Isis, and Nerthus, whom the ancients associated with the land and abundant harvest, are myths of archetypal great mothers of the land that have persevered in their cultural power. Many twentieth-century poets responding to social unrest and political oppression in their societies used archetypes and images of the great mother goddess to invoke her reviving qualities. Ireland and Iraq were just two of the many countries that faced social and political instability in the twentieth century as a legacy of colonialism, and Irish and Iraqi poets such as Seamus Heaney and Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb were products of colonial violence. Both Heaney and al-Sayyāb lived in exile and observed the social, economic, and political decay of their home countries. Finding in the myth of the great mother a hope to reform their ruined worlds, they used that myth in their poetry in hopes of inspiring social and political rebirth in these societies.

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HEANEY'S AND AL-SAYYĀB'S MYTHOPOESIS

The poetry of Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) furnishes an artistic record of the social, cultural, and political suffering that Ireland and its people experienced under the yoke of colonization. Heaney's poetry reflects his efforts to highlight the cultural experience of his nation by elevating his "private experience to the level of cultural expression" (Tobin 16) in order to shed more light on the Irish cause. This is evidently articulated in his bog poems, from his collections *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North*

(1975), which were inspired by the photographs in P.V. Glob's *The Bog People* that depict "Iron Age bodies discovered preserved in the peat bogs of Jutland [...]. They provide] evidence of ritual sacrifice and inhumation to the fertility goddess Nerthus" (Goodby 157). Heaney describes Nerthus as "the Mother Goddess, the goddess of the ground who needed new bridegrooms each winter to bed with her in her sacred place, in the bog, to ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in the spring" (qtd. in Lloyd 331) and states that her tradition is "a source of liberation and renewal" (qtd. in Dennison 202). Marilyn Chin argues that "through Heaney's poetic the bog has become a symbol of national identity and mythology" (176). Heaney's poetry has mythologized Nerthus and the bogs as national archetypes of rebirth and deliverance of Ireland.

392 The connection between the people of the bogs of Jutland and the Irish condition has become a significant feature of the Irish poetic tradition after Heaney. Floyd Collins notes that "before Seamus Heaney's *Wintering Out* and *North*, the bogs of Ireland were scarcely a subject for poetry" (55). The bogs in Heaney's poetry have transformed from functioning as saviours of bodies to serving as saviours of the Irish cultural and communal identity. In his comment on Heaney's poem "Bogland," John Dennison states that "Heaney had discovered in the familiar ground of his childhood a symbol for communal identity and cultural memory: the bog was already a feature of Heaney's pre-Troubles effort to realize a poetry that connected to the communal consciousness" (54). As an Irish native, Heaney focuses on and critiques the colonial powers that have overwhelmed his country and people. He seeks freedom by resorting to the authority of myth, particularly the myth of Nerthus and the stories of the bog, with which he enriches his poetry. Images and symbols of the fertile land, associated with the myth of the great mother, left an important mark on his work.

The archetypal image of Ireland in Heaney's poetry fluctuates between horrible reality and dreams of deliverance and dignity. In his poem "The Tollund Man" from *Wintering Out*, he views Ireland as a wasteland in which he feels "lost" and "unhappy" despite being "at home," an image of the lack of the freedom and integrity that were lost in the British colonial oppression of Ireland. The bog that ejects the Tollund Man's body embraces Heaney's hopes of revival and social rebirth, and manifests his eagerness to generate art similarly to his poetical bogs that generate people, as John Goodby points out in his commentary on Heaney's bog poems:

Both bog and the self of the poet are involuted, self-infolded, made up of the "ferments of husk and leaf," recycling vegetation or language (the leaves pun is implicit) [...] and for Heaney another of its [the bog] attraction is therefore its nature as a primal self-originating source of identity and meaning [...]. (159-160)

In the poem "Bog Queen" from *North*, Heaney draws a parallel between the art he creates and the bog that generates preserved bodies. The bogs have therefore become a poetic storehouse of archetypes necessary for mythopoesis. Heaney's use of mythology in his poetry hence contributes to the notion of revival he seeks through art for

the socionational conditions of his motherland, Ireland.

Heaney's *Wintering Out* and *North* use the archetype of the great mother to produce images of Ireland's glorious past and obscure future in light of the oppressive social and political situations of the late twentieth century. Such imagery is common among the writings of other authors who face similar conditions. This invites a comparison using Northrop Frye's archetypal critical theory, which treats works of literature that use similar mythical archetypes as reflections of identical structure. In *The Stubborn Structure* (1970), Frye focuses on the role of myth as a connecting power of literature, and argues that myth and the language of myth form the stubborn structure that holds literature together (17). Frye stresses the importance of comparative examinations of poetry, stating that "every poem must be examined as a unity, but no poem is an isolatable unity. Every poem is inherently connected with other poems of its kind, whether explicitly [...] or implicitly" (Frye, *Fables* 126). Against this background, Heaney's use of the myth of the great mother can be better interpreted by comparing it to other poetry that uses similar imagery and mythical allusions.

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Among the twentieth-century Arab poets who experienced harsh social and political conditions after World War II similar to those experienced by Heaney is Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb (1926-1964). Images of death, decay, and oppression are characteristic of his poetry, which, like Heaney's, seeks hope in the myths of the past. Al-Sayyāb's adversity results in part from the hegemonic political and colonial powers that devastated his country, and which exert great influence on his writings, particularly his poetry collection *Unshūdat Al-Matar* (*Hymn of the Rain*, 1954), in which he creates his mythopoetic tradition.

Al-Sayyāb and Heaney both address the national and social decline of their countries in their poetry. They use the myths of the great mother to support their artistic efforts to recall the reviving powers of the past to their present need. Heaney's poetry collection *North*, for instance, represents his endeavours to "bring the present into dialogue with the past" (Tobin 141) and regain the mythical powers of rebirth. He is preoccupied with the contemporary troubled social and political conditions that have resulted from Britain's hegemony and exploitation of Ireland. Heaney's and al-Sayyāb's poetry realizes in the mythology of the past a reviving source of hope that would bring about a change to the bitter reality of the present, and help to find a positive outlet for the future. Terri DeYoung argues in this regard that it is through the use of symbolism "derived from ancient pagan fertility myths as poetic source material" (39) that al-Sayyāb introduces his visions of and hopes for a revived Arab world.

MYTHOLOGIZED SEEDS AND AGRARIAN ARCHETYPES

One of the archetypal images related to the myth of the great mother that is common in the poetry of al-Sayyāb and Heaney is the image of seeds. Frye proposes that arche-

types of life and death derived from mythology are manifested in “the image of seeds of new life buried in a dead world of snow or swamp” (Frye, *Anatomy* 198). Heaney’s poem “Nerthus” from *Wintering Out* carries the name of the goddess who lives in the swamps that are the source of the preserved bodies of the bog people. She is the source of life and preservation for both the preserved bog people and the seeds that spring from the ground; their extrication from the bogs signifies rebirth. Nerthus’s “long grains gathering to the gouged split” (2) indicate the uneasy but obtainable renewal of life, symbolized by grains sprouting from seeds.

In the same vein, Al-Sayyāb mythologizes the imagery of seeds in his poetry. In his poem “Madīnat al-Sinbād” [City of Sinbad] from *Hymn of the Rain*, seeds signify life after death. The following lines depict the uneasy deliverance of the seeds from a harsh environment after the fall of rain:

Bestir, O rain,
The beds of bones and snow and particles of dust,
394 The beds of stone,
Make the seeds to grow, let the flowers to open (4-7)¹

Salma Khadra Jayyusi argues that al-Sayyāb depicts the city as a barren place of “corruption and cruelty where love dies and only impotency and cruelty prevails” (*Anthology* 32). The “bones,” “dust,” and “stones” in “City of Sinbad” are suggestive of barrenness and sterility, and signify political death (Bullāṭah 145). The seeds challenge the harsh reality and grow from the stones and bones, carrying life to the dead earth after the fall of rain. Their growth revives the poet’s dreams of reforming the troubled social and political situations of his world.

Heaney likewise uses the archetype of seeds in “The Tollund Man” from *Wintering Out*. The Tollund man is one of the preserved bog bodies, and is identified with the powers of regeneration. His “last gruel of winter seeds / [is] caked in his stomach” (7-8), an image calling for instant revival as his corpse still preserves some seeds that signify hopes of new life. The Tollund man is supposedly one of Nerthus’s grooms who represent the concept of sacrifice to the great mother of the land. Like al-Sayyāb’s seeds, the seeds in the Tollund man’s stomach function as an emblematic promise of rebirth.

The imagery of seeds in al-Sayyāb’s “City of Sinbad” and Heaney’s “The Tollund Man” evokes rebirth in different ways. The seeds aesthetically nourish the poets with eloquent archetypes of revival, which they use as inspiration for their poetry; thus, the seeds contribute to the birth of poetry. Moreover, those rewards of the land strengthen the bond between the land and its people and bridge the gap that grows from feelings of its loss, keeping them connected through the millennia.

In addition to seeds, Heaney uses other examples of agrarian imagery in his poetry to address the theme of socionational rebirth. “Punishment” from *North* is a case in point, as Heaney compares the head of the figure of the tortured woman in the poem to “a stubble of black corn” to connect her to the land and to the rites of fertility that

were meant to bring revival. Heaney's "Punishment" summons up the sacrifice and bloodletting stories of the Iron Age societies with which Heaney is familiar (Hart 403-404), particularly stories of women who were sacrificed, in order to feed the consciousness of his own society whose members were being punished for sectarian and national causes. In recalling this imagery he seeks to support the national memory with notions of liberty and sacrificial rebirth.

The seeds in al-Sayyāb's and Heaney's poems also resist oppression by challenging the tough land and growing out. In both authors' works, seeds "can help to overcome cultural dispossession by the operation of cultural memory as cultural repossession" (Tota 153). They serve as forces of decolonization in this context by strengthening the bond between the citizens and their motherland, which they long to regain.

MYTHOLOGIZED FEMALE FIGURES

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The poetry of al-Sayyāb and Heaney reveals the effects of certain social incidents on the consciousness and writing of the poets. The imagery of a tortured woman appears both in Heaney's "Punishment" and in al-Sayyāb's "Ilā Jamilah Bū Hayrad" ("Ode to Jamilah Bu Hayrad") from *Hymn of the Rain*, and functions in these poems on two levels. First, the woman serves as a poetic archetype of sacrifice for the land. Second, on the level of mythopoesis she appears as a deity who would become a mythologized great mother of the land. The female characters in "Punishment" and "Ode to Jamilah Bu Hayrad" endure merciless treatment that drives them to their doom. Heaney and al-Sayyāb mythologize the deaths of the women to remodel them as mother figures, and use mythopoesis to highlight their deaths as sacrifices for the land. The speaker of "Punishment" opens the poem with a reflection on the scene of suffering:

I can feel the tug
Of the halter at the nape
Of her neck, the wind
On her naked front.
[...]
Her shaved head
Like a stubble of black corn,
Her blindfold a soiled bandage. (1-4, 17-19)

"Punishment" is one of Heaney's bog poems; the woman is a bog person who dies for the sake of fertility. The signs of punishment appear on her neck and head to emphasize the suffering she experiences, which are held in the poet's consciousness as he reimagines her as a great mother. A similar scene is depicted in al-Sayyāb's "Ode to Jamilah Bu Hayrad," in which Jamilah faces brutal treatment comparable to that of Heaney's sacrificial victim. The bitterness of their suffering is, on the one hand, a reflection of the grandeur of their sacrifice, and, on the other hand, an accelerator for the rebirth of contemporary great mothers. Jamilah's torture is too much to bear

for the speaker, as her blood drips into his heart and increases his love of the land:

Oh, our hanging, crying sister
 Your bleeding limbs
 Are dripping and weeping inside my heart.
 Oh, you, who took death from its bearers
 From the murk of clay that contains it
 Up to the thick skies of blood. (12-17)

“Punishment” is based on actual historical incidents that form part of Heaney’s memory, and the tortured woman in the poem probably designates real contemporary Irish victims, as Eugene O’Brien speculates:

Whether these victims are Iron Age figures or contemporary victims of Northern Irish violence is not specified but I would suggest that he is referring to contemporary figures, and I would also feel that he is, once again, foregrounding the victim and the reality of death, as opposed to some form of mythic religious dimension. (38)

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O’Brien later clarifies this statement, explaining that “Punishment” is “a poem wherein Heaney has been severely criticised for seeming to justify the nationalist community’s attempts at punishing young Catholic girls who dated British soldiers” (38). Whether the woman is being punished for her resistance to the oppressor or sacrificed for violating communal norms, she dies to bear the suffering of her contemporary counterparts.

The woman in “Ode to Jamilah Bu Hayrad” is treated in a similar fashion to her counterpart in “Punishment.” Al-Sayyāb’s poem is grounded in the story of Jamilah Bu Hayrad, an Algerian female nationalist who resisted the French colonial rule of Algeria, and was imprisoned and tortured by the dominant French regime for her patriotic activities. She is a victim of an oppressive colonizing force, and thus forms a parallel to the victims alluded to in “Punishment.” Her death for a demonstrably identified socionational cause leads her to become, in al-Sayyāb’s poem, a figure of the great mother, especially since she is based on an actual historical person.

SACRIFICIAL SCAPEGOATS

Both Heaney and al-Sayyāb introduce the tortured women in “Punishment” and “Ode to Jamilah Bu Hayrad” with the imagery of the scapegoat. “Punishment” is an allegory that “draws parallels between the ritual sacrifice from the Iron Age and the killings that were at their height in Northern Ireland at the time” (Nordin 176). Ritual sacrifices involve the slaughter of scapegoats to represent the cleansing of sins. Frye classifies the world of the scapegoat within the demonic world that “may remain in its unworked form of deserts, rocks, and waste land. Cities of destruction and dreadful night belong here” (Frye, *Anatomy* 150). Both Heaney in “Punishment” and al-Sayyāb in “Ode to Jamilah Bu Hayrad” mythologize the worlds of their respective

poems as demonic worlds of scapegoats; Heaney's sacrificial woman experiences "the stones of silence" (31), while Jamilah lives in "the murk of clay" (16). The poets create new spheres of mythology in which the figure of the great mother is transformed into a scapegoat who endures suffering for the sake of her lovers.

The female figures in the poems also embody aspects of rebellion needed to face and overcome adversity. Rebellion adds meaning to the sacrificial death of the women even as it contributes positively to the socionational and political status quo. Al-Sayyāb's poem foresees in rebellion a power of resurrection, as in line 89 the speaker identifies Jamilah with Ishtar, the Babylonian mother goddess who "was worshipped as the great goddess, presiding over earth, fertility, love, marriage, battle, and storm" (Alban 109). She is deemed rebellious for loving the mortal Tammuz, and for challenging Ershkigal, her sister and goddess of the underworld, by travelling to her realm. As the story goes, life on earth is threatened after Ishtar's descent to the world of Ershkigal. However "she must, to fully realize her role as earth goddess, experience and then accept that death is essential to regenerate new life" (McCoppin 55). Sacrifice should therefore follow rebellion to revive the endangered earth:

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Ershkigal demands that a life be conceded to her before she will allow Ishtar to ascend from her symbolic death, and in maintaining the ancient mythic archetype of the goddess with her male consort, Ishtar gives Ershkigal Tammuz to assure her own resurrection. (McCoppin 56)

The scene turns into a sacrificial rite in which Tammuz's life becomes the price for Ishtar's rebirth, as her return is sought to revive the land. Ishtar's symbolic death thereafter becomes an emblem of revival and prosperity following adversity.

The relationship between rebellion and resurrection is poetically shaped as similar to that between death and life. The death of the rebels who seek liberty for their countries and integrity for themselves becomes reminiscent of the victims of mythic fertility sacrifice rites who are killed to assure the fertility of the land. Heaney and al-Sayyāb thus both mythologize contemporary victims of violence by relying on the myth of the great mother of the land. The rebellious women in "Punishment" and "Ode to Jamilah Bu Hayrad" are portrayed as victims of fertility sacrifice rites, consuming their lives in a symbolic manner to bestow life on others and on the land. When the speaker of al-Sayyāb's poem calls her "Ishtar," Jamilah even transcends the state of victimhood to become a great mother of the land for whose sake human sacrifices are offered.

Heaney's "Punishment" is an articulation of the effect of Iron Age stories on the poet, stories from a time when "you have a society where girls' heads were shaved for adultery" (Heaney, qtd. in Hart 403). This view is perhaps echoed in "Punishment," whose speaker describes the woman's head as "shaved... / like a stubble of black corn" (17-18). The woman in "Punishment" can be read in this context as a land ravished by strangers. The punishment she receives is an oppressive reaction to her unselfish patriotic activism. Heaney indeed sympathizes with her as one of those victims sacri-

ficed for the land and cherishes her: “my poor scapegoat, / I almost love you” (28-29).

Declan Kiberd unfavourably speculates on “Punishment,” commenting thus on Heaney’s treatment of the Irish women:

When the IRA [Irish Republican Army] tars and feathers a woman for fraternising with British soldiers, he [Heaney] is reminded not only of a parallel case of a Danish woman sacrificed to the land in an ancient fertility rite but also of the accusing parallel between the IRA and himself, since both are guilty of reducing woman to a cultural totem. (qtd. in Innes 75)

The parallel with women in ancient fertility rites that Kiberd points at is part of Heaney’s technique of using mythology in the poem to value the death of his fellow citizens. However, Heaney’s mythopoesis can hardly be conceived as reductively as Kiberd argues. His imagistic techniques have transcended the level of producing cultural totems; his mythopoesis has granted him the artistic powers he uses to generate memorable socionational icons from and for the Irish people.

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Mythopoesis also provides Heaney’s poetic subjects with honouring powers, to add glory to the ceremony of the woman’s death. Both Heaney’s and al-Sayyāb’s female figures are poetically created as transcendental national symbols. An examination of their circumstances, however, shows that the death of Jamilah is more sublime as it brings pride for her posterity. Scenes of torture much like those in “Punishment” are featured early in “Ode to Jamilah Bu Hayrad.” In line 82, the speaker calls Jamilah Ishtar: “O Ishtar, mother of fertility, love, and charity,” an analogy that emphasizes the two important qualities she shares with the goddess of the land: fertility and sacrifice. The speaker thereafter calls her a whiff from the realm of the gods (146). Abdul-Nasir Mohammad argues that in al-Sayyāb’s poem, Jamilah changes from a militant figure to a complex mythical symbol; she becomes the earth that gives fertility and life (477). In this context, she is recreated through mythopoesis as a great mother figure who nurtures, attends, and cures the oppressed.

Heaney’s poetics similarly identifies the land with aspects of the mythical great mother. He dedicates different bog poems to Nerthus, who is the embodiment of those aspects. His poems “The Tolland Man” and “Wedding Day” from *Wintering Out*, and “Come to the Bower,” “Bog Queen,” “Strange Fruit,” and “Kinship” from *North* all celebrate Nerthus and reflect the influence of ancient traditions of sacrifice to the motherland on his modern consciousness. In his essay “Mother Land,” published in the *Listener* on December 7, 1972, Heaney calls attention to ancient societies performing traditional rites of sacrifice:

It turns out that the bogs in Northern Europe in the first and second centuries AD contained the shrines of the god or goddess of the time, and in order that the vegetation and the community would live again after the winter, human sacrifices were made: people were drowned in the bogs. Tacitus reports on this in his *Germania*. You have a society in the Iron Age where there was ritual blood-letting. You have a society where girls’ heads were shaved for adultery, you have a religion centering on the territory, on a goddess of the ground and of the land, and associated with sacrifice. Now in many ways the fury of

Irish Republicanism is associated with a religion like this, with a female goddess who has appeared in various guises. She appears as Cathleen ni Houlihan in Yeats's plays; she appears as Mother Ireland. I think that the Republican ethos is a feminine religion, in a way. It seems to me that there are satisfactory imaginative parallels between this religion and time and our own time. They are observed with amazement and a kind of civilized tut-tut by Tacitus in the first century AD and by leader-writers in the *Daily Telegraph* in the 20th century. (qtd. in Hart 403-404)

Heaney's mythopoetic awareness is obviously influenced by the Northern European societies he describes in the extract quoted above. The "blood-letting" rite is depicted in his poem "Kinship." As he outlines the decay befalling the land in the poem, Heaney uses the synonyms "quagmire, swampland, morass" (25) to emphasize its ruination. He also describes the land as "domains of the cold-blooded" (27) in which the notions of death and sacrifice for the land are established, inasmuch as the phrase connotes the cold-blooded killers who execute the bog people. In the passage quoted below, the parallel between the killing of the people of the bog and the Irish people sacrificed for Ireland is fascinating:

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Our mother ground
Is sour with the blood
Of her faithful,
They lie gargling
In her sacred heart
As the legions stare
From the ramparts. (126-32)

Al-Sayyāb's "City of Sinbad" portrays an analogous case of barrenness and explicit bloodshed. Of the speaker's city, only ruins remain; its people, however, express a spirit of resistance and willingness to sacrifice to regain life. Jayyusi argues that the Arab wasteland in al-Sayyāb's poetry is "saved from complete waste only by death and the spilling of blood, analogous to the falling of rain over parched land" (*Trends* 724). Sinbad, the speaker of the poem, is a legendary symbol of sacrificial resistance. He poses a series of questions in the poem through which he emphasizes the notions of death and the urgency of sacrifice for the land:

And is this my city? Are these the ruins
on which was inscribed: "long live life!"
With the blood of its slain?
Is there no god in that place, no water or fields?
Is this my city? Daggers of the Tatars
Sheathed above its gates, and the desert pants
With thirst around its streets, unvisited by the moon?
Is this my city? Are these the pits,
And these the bones? (144-52)

The gloomy imagery al-Sayyāb employs establishes the readers' appreciation for the long-awaited rebirth to change the dejection of the scene. Sinbad's nostalgia marks him as a potential lover of the city, which is an incarnation of Ishtar. Frye argues that

an earth goddess “may be attended by a subordinate male figure who is successively her son, her lover, and eventually her sacrificial victim” (Frye, *Romanticism* 6). The poet summons Sinbad in this context for a sacrificial ritual for the great mother to reflect his hopes for the fertility of his motherland.

Ancient societies “where girls’ heads were shaved for adultery” (qtd. in Hart 403) have also inspired Heaney’s poetic imagination, as he states in “Mother Land” and he demonstrates in “Punishment.” Another influence on Heaney’s poetics is the cult of a “goddess of the ground and of the land” (qtd. in Hart 403-404) where sacrifice is conducted. His poem “Kinship” uses the concept of sacrifice to the great mother of the ground so as to highlight the bond that ties the people to their motherland. In his essay “Feeling into Words,” Heaney views Ireland as “the goddess of the ground who needed new bridegrooms each winter to bed with her in her sacred place, in the bog” (qtd. in Lloyd 331). Heaney uses the motif of digging in “Kinship” to help the speaker travel to the realm of the great mother goddess. The act of digging into the ground, on the one hand, feeds the digger’s hopes to bed with the fertility goddess. Digging here is fertilizing; it is a cultivation of the land (Goodby 162). On the other hand, digging into the ground is also associated with themes of descent into the underworld. Frye argues in *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* that themes of descent are manifested in a variety of ways; some images pertain to “the bottom of the night,” parallel to the bottom of the ground, where “the serving up of a child or lover as food” takes place (118). This image invites comparison with the annual trip of the bridegroom to the bog searching for Nerthus to be her mate and sacrifice in Heaney’s “Kinship.”

Nerthus’s victims have caught Heaney’s attention and supported his imagination with relevant imagery. In 1973, Heaney travelled to Denmark, where the head of the Tollund man is preserved. John Michael Bell speculates about Heaney’s visit:

His attraction to the bog trove as correlative symbolic resources was accentuated by his deepening need to find a form capable of sustaining some degree of poetic distance from the immediate horrors of the Irish crisis. His rationale in exploring the bog’s symbolic potential as a response to the gruesome quotidian reality of Northern Ireland is explicit in his remarks to Brian Donnelly [...] “Now there is of course something terrible about that, but somehow language, words didn’t live in the way that they have to live in a poem when they are hovering over that kind of horror and pity. They just became inert. And it was in these victims made strangely beautiful by the process of lying in bogs that somehow I felt I could make offerings or images that were emblems.” (276-277)

It is through his mythopoetic creativity that Heaney has turned those victims of the past into archetypes and “emblems” of resistance and renewal. He uses the technique of mythopoeisis to endow his language with historical powers that can bring the past into a connection with the present to help it to recover.

DESCENT TO THE NETHERWORLD

Concepts of sacrifice and martyrdom are embodied in the theme of descent into the underground, the trip to the “the womb of an earth-mother” (Frye, *Secular* 119). The “faithful” sacrificial grooms in Heaney’s “Kinship” and the “rebellious” sacrificial figures in al-Sayyāb’s “Ode to Jamilah Bu Hayrad” set off on a mortal quest to save their great mother. Their return is doubtlessly unattainable. They are martyrs insofar as they die for a nationalistic cause to give eternity to the great mother goddess, and thus give life to their motherland.

The motif of descent into the underground is at the heart of Frye’s concept of “creation myths.” Frye perceives in those myths an eventual focus on “some kind of earth-mother, the womb and tomb of all living things” (*Secular* 112). The “womb” implies the quality of regeneration, the “tomb” of decay. The great mother thus contradictorily functions as both the giver and taker of life. Taking life in this context is arguably not violent or hostile as it is a gift given by the great mother at the beginning; thus, she has the authority to return it when needed. The sacrifice for the great mother is therefore demonstrated as constructive, a form of martyrdom. Frye argues that such kind of death need not be explained (*Secular* 112). It is that death engulfing al-Sayyāb’s “City of Sinbad” whose people are swallowed by Ishtar’s “tomb” as the “pits,” “bones” and “stones” signify in the poem:

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Is this my city? Are these the pits,
 And these the bones?
 The shadows look down from their houses
 [...]
 And in the village Ishtar is dying of thirst,
 There are no flowers on her forehead
 And in her hands there is a basket, its fruit are stones. (51-64)

Frye’s concept of creation myths regards death as essential for the creation process,² and necessary for its fulfillment. This is evident in Heaney’s “Kinship.” The speaker of “Kinship” sets off on a voluntary trip to the netherworld, which ends in a meeting with the great mother goddess. Heaney uses the imagery of digging to signify the trip to the underground where Nerthus presumably exists. The speaker finds “a turf-spade” (49), and sinks “it upright” (60) until he “stand[s] at the edge of centuries / facing a goddess” (71-72). He portrays his quest to find the great mother Nerthus by drawing on the act of digging into the ground. He does not seem reluctant to descend, even though digging signifies falling into the tomb, not the womb: it is death, not birth. This paradox emphasizes the hope embedded in death, a notion emphasized in the speaker’s last words: “the goddess swallows / our love and terror.” This couplet implies the poet’s love and sacrifice for his great mother Ireland.

Heaney’s vision of the connection between the land and its lovers invites a comparison with the views of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, a well-known modern Arab poet and critic, who comments on the modern Arab poets’ belief that “love and sacrifice shall

bring fertility to the land” (15). The sacrifice for the land embodies the quality of martyrdom with which the heroes are rewarded. The victims of “Ode to Jamilah Bu Hayrad” and “Kinship” in this context die for the sake of the great motherland, and are thus regarded as martyrs and heroes. The rebellious speaker in “Ode to Jamilah Bu Hayrad” announces:

Today a rebel redeems with his blood
Old and young, redeems women,
Redeems the grains in the field, redeems the growth. (71-73)

The rebel “redeems with his blood” the people and the land. He is a hero saving his country and fellow citizens, even though it costs him his life. This image is echoed in “Kinship” where the “mother ground / is sour with the blood / of her faithful” martyrs (126-28). In both poems, the great mother of the land is desired by her faithful rebels/martyrs so far as she is the source of love and rebirth. They would die, or at least be hurt, for her sake to assure her resurrection.

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The Tollund Man is similarly portrayed as a “bridegroom to the goddess” (12) Nerthus, who is the lover and the mother. Daniel Tobin argues that “The Tollund Man” is a poem reflecting a “ritual sacrifice” (93), and adds that “more than a few critics have suggested that ‘The Tollund Man’ locates Irish political martyrdom within an archetypal paradigm” (92-93). “The Tollund Man” in this respect is a representation of martyrdom and sacrifice for the land. In a comment on Heaney’s “The Grauballe Man” from *North*, Carlanda Green states that “many of [Nerthus’s] victims wore neckrings or nooses, suggesting that they were consecrated to the goddess to insure fertility of corps, animals, and man as well” (5). The Grauballe Man is shrouded in earth with a “slashed throat” (20) and a “wound” (22), which are evidence of sacrifice as they are marks suggesting wearing “neckrings.” The wound is described as a “cured wound / [that] opens inwards to a dark / elderberry place” (22-24). Elderberry is a traditional natural remedy,³ signifying fertility and life. It is an image reminiscent of al-Sayyāb’s “City with No Rain,” whose speaker describes the wound of the rebel as the place from which he annually returns with the flowers that symbolize rebirth:

There, to where he carries his fiery wound every year
The wound of the ever-rotating world, its redeemer
And saviour that every year returns from there with flowers. (39-41)

CONCLUSION

The relationship between the lovers of the land and the great mother of the land in al-Sayyāb’s and Heaney’s poetry is depicted in various recurring images, such as those of the land as a bride and its sacrificing lovers as grooms, which stress the strength of the ties between the land and its people. This nuptial imagery serves three

major purposes. The first is to assure the revival of the land, since nuptial imagery implies the notion of cultivation and fertilization, and is used in this context to assert the need for rebirth. The second is to make marriage a culmination of the trip to the netherworld, since, as Frye argues, marriage is one of the themes of ascent from the ground (*Secular* 137). The third is to reward those who willingly choose to be the bridegrooms of the great mother with a “sacred marriage”;⁴ Karen M. Moloney argues that “For Heaney, the motif of the sacred marriage affords a way to honor them [the victims] and restore their dignity” (70). P.V. Glob in this respect states that Nerthus “so often gave their faces her blessing and preserved them through the millennia” (qtd. in Hart 404). Death for the land is consequently viewed as rebirth insofar as it exerts a positive effect on the victims of the great mother, who are conceived as martyrs and pursuers of freedom. Comparative examination of ancient mythical heritage in the poetry of Heaney and al-Sayyāb demonstrates the great potential of mytho-poiesis as a poetic strategy and a powerful source of inspiration for national revival.

NOTES

1. This article uses John Mikhail Ashfour’s translation of “City of Sinbad” from *When the Words Burn*.
2. The “creation process” is the equivalent of life.
3. For more details, see “Elderberry/Elderflower Benefits.”
4. A term used by Karen Marguerite Moloney to describe the reward that Nerthus’s victims obtain.

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