

Literary Representations of the Snake Woman Motif: A Comparative Analysis

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ÖZET

Bu makale hem Doğu hem de Batı kaynaklı söylenceler ile yazın yapıtlarında sıkça karşılaşılan “Yılan Kadın” imgesinin dinsel, kültürel ve arketipsel kaynaklarını araştırmakta ve bir yazınsal imge olarak farklı adlar ile yer aldığı dört yazın metnini karşılaştırmaktadır. Bu farklı adlar Yemlika, Şahmaran ve Lamia, karşılaştırılan metinler ise Binbir Gece Masallarından Yılanların Kraliçesi Yemlika'nın öyküsü, Murathan Mungan'ın “Şahmaran'ın Bacakları” ile Alifa Rifat'ın “My World of the Unknown” adlı kısa öyküleri ile John Keats'in “Lamia” adlı uzun şiiridir.

Symbols play a large part in human life, because they are derived from the unconscious and are capable of evoking a deep emotional response, “a psychic charge” in Jung's words. One such symbolic image is that of the snake-woman, which appears in various forms in the ancient myths and stories of both the East and the West. It is obvious that this image is full of psychic energy, triggering a variety of complex responses; but the question is, just what does it symbolize? The symbolism of the snake is ambiguous in itself. When it is coupled with the equally ambiguous image of woman, it becomes doubly charged, creating a mystical effect which renders it very suitable for many enigmatic narratives. In Greek mythology there are many variants of this coupling of the snake with woman, but the most renowned is the figure of Lamia, the serpent woman who devours children. Similarly, in Middle Eastern mythology, there is the figure of Yemlika, or Shahmaran, around whom several stories were formulated.

The affinity between woman and serpent has been noted since the earliest times of human history, because both embody the power of life. The snake's ability to cast its skin, and woman's continuous regeneration of herself through birth, as well as the belief that they both exert control over waters, the snake because it lives in the crevices of the

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earth, and woman because of the flow of milk and blood in her body during the nursing and menstrual periods, has led to this perceived analogy. As such, they also exert control over the life-giving forces in nature and are related to the Great Goddess, or the Earth or Mother Goddess, who presided over the universe before the great patriarchs of the East and West dethroned her and reduced her power.

God's ascendancy over the Goddess is represented in many different forms, the most important of which is the killing of the serpent. "By killing the serpent, gods and male heroes not only won control over water sources and the harvest, but also over the female goddesses"(Ergener, 63). World mythology abounds in stories of this kind: The Greek story of Bellerophon and Chimera, the Sumerian story of Ninurta and Asog, the Hittite story of Teshup and Illuyanka, and the Babylonian stories of Baal and Lotan and Marduk and Tiamat are just a few of these examples (Ergener, 62).

The connection between the Great Goddess and the serpent power is also apparent in the story of the Earth Goddess Gaea, the founder of the Delphic oracle, who is referred to as Gaea Pelope, the female serpent, by Hesiod (Walker, 306). The cult of the Great Goddess was older than the patriarchal systems of belief, which accorded ascendancy to the sky (the male principle) over the earth(the female principle). In Greece this happened by highlighting the male line of descent from Uranus through Cronus to Zeus and causing Gaea, the Earth Goddess, to lose her importance. Similarly, the Babylonian Mother Goddess Tiamat is defeated by Marduk, who becomes the supreme god. In Anatolia, too, the earliest cults seem to center around the figure of Cybele, the Earth Goddess, whose counterparts in different cultures under different names are Ishtar, Venus, Astarte, Isis, Demeter, and Eve, but all are later subordinated to male figures.

Another thing that unites all of these figures is their connection with snakes. As Chevalier points out, "All the great goddesses of nature, those Mother-goddesses which Christianity refashioned as Mary, Mother of God made flesh, had serpents as attributes. However, the Mother of Christ, the second Eve, was to crush the serpent's head instead of listening to it. First in this line was Isis, wearing the royal cobra on her forehead. . . . She was followed by Cybele and Demeter and that Cretan serpent-goddess who was chthonian as well" (850-51).

The serpent, then, is life itself, or rather, the life-giving principle. The similarity of the words in Arabic for 'serpent' and 'life' — el-hayyah and el-hayat, respectively, testifies to this fact (Chevalier, 845; Walker, 308). In ancient Greek, the word *geros* signified both 'old age' and 'skin', connecting the serpent's observed act of shedding its skin with the idea of eternal life/youth and immortality (Ergener, 65). So, before the masculinization of the serpent occurred, it was perceived as a female principle. This female principle is more complete than any of the male gods created by the patriarchal systems of belief. The Gnostics used the image of Ouroboros, a snake biting its own tail and thus

forming a circle, as a symbol of the supreme oneness of being. It represents the continuous cycle of birth and death and perpetual self fertilization. The circle is one of the earliest graphic representations of deity, signifying complete self-sufficiency, ultimate wholeness, and perfection, which are the attributes of the supreme being, the life-generating force that transcends all pairs of opposites (Cirlot, 47).

Joseph Campbell asserts that, with the arrival of patriarchy, this older and more complete view is abandoned and duality enters the scene. All pairs of opposites, such as male and female, life and death, and good and evil, are clearly set apart "as though they were absolutes in themselves and not merely aspects of the larger entity of life". He calls the former the 'lunar' and the latter the 'solar' mythic view because of the moon's association with the female and the sun's association with the male principle (Occidental Mythology, 27).

The lunar view is also closely associated with the serpent power, because, like the serpent, the moon, too, renews itself through waxing and waning, and, like the serpent again, it exerts control over life-giving waters. The lunar wisdom is true wisdom, because, like the moon, it sees both the light and dark, and thus is greater than the solar wisdom, which makes the dividing line between pairs of opposites distinct and sees things only partially.

The snake-woman is the embodiment of the world-generating, life-giving principle, the lunar wisdom, the One from which spring the many, the Great Goddess who bore all the gods that succeeded her. Even the great patriarchs of Judaism, Christianity and Islam were unable to overlook this fact, and had to incorporate it in their Holy Scriptures in one way or another. "You are dust," says Yahweh to Adam and Eve, "and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3: 13-19). "But," comments Campbell, "the dust out of which the punished couple had been taken, was, of course, the goddess Earth, deprived of her antropomorphic features, yet retaining in her elemental aspect her function of furnishing the substance into which . . . Yahweh, had breathed the breath of her children's life. And they were to return to her, not to the father, in death. Out of her they had been taken, and to her they would return Adam and Eve were thus the children of the mother-goddess Earth" (Occidental Mythology, 29). Like the Cosmic Serpent Ananta in Indian mythology, which is also female, she envelops everything and is the beginning and end of all things.

In the Gnostic Christian scriptures, the story of the Creation was told in reverse order, with Eve as the creator of Yahweh and punishing him for forgetting that she was his mother (Walker, 308.). This may explain the fact that the name Eve, Havvah in Hebrew and Arabic, meant life, life-giving, or possibly snake (Brewer's Dictionary, 396). But even in orthodox Christianity, the notion of the Mother-Goddess had to be preserved, although it was transformed into Virgin Mary; because even gods need mothers.

This early notion of the Great Goddess was suppressed but never completely erased from the collective memory of the later generations. It kept reappearing under different guises, one of which is the snake-woman motif. In the texts I chose for this paper I will attempt to show its transformation and different aspects emphasized by different cultures. My first example is Yemlika, the Queen of Serpents in the Arabian Nights, as it is the main source which forms the basis for the others. The other texts are the modernized re-telling of the traditional Turkish tale of Shahmaran by Murathan Mungan, a contemporary Turkish writer and fabulator, in his short story titled "The Legs of Shahmaran", Keats's narrative poem titled "Lamia", and a short story by a contemporary Egyptian woman writer, Alifa Rif'at, titled "My World of the Unknown".

The Arabian Nights (or the Thousand and One Nights, as it is known in the East), has a structure of stories within stories, but there is also a framing story which unites and envelopes all the others embedded in it. And this framing story is something like this: Having caught his beloved wife in an act of hideous adultery, King Shahryar decides that all women are inherently unfaithful, and to protect his name and honor starts murdering each subsequent wife after the wedding night. This goes on for three years and the King's wazir starts to have problems finding new women. He tells his plight to his daughter Shahrazad, who offers herself as a bride. Shahrazad agrees to be decapitated in the morning, and using this as a pretext, asks the King to allow her beloved sister Dunyazad to spend the last night with her, in the bridal bedroom. The King accepts this as her last wish, makes love to her in front of the little Dunyazad, and gets ready to go to sleep when, feigning sleeplessness Dunyazad asks Shahrazad to tell her one of her wonderful stories to pass the time. So the long process of story-telling begins, sometimes amusing Shahryar, sometimes exciting his senses to the point of sexual arousal, but always keeping him in suspense and wanting to hear more, for Shahrazad always times her stories as to end them at the most climactic point when the sun rises and thus manages to avoid her fate for a thousand and one nights (or this may simply be a manner of speech indicating a long time), during which she conceives and delivers two children by Shahryar without his knowledge. When she finally brings forth her children and shows them to Shahryar, he forgives her and they live happily ever after.

The tale of Yemlika, the Queen of Serpents is told on the 355th night, and in order to make it palatable to the King, Shahrazad cleverly places it between two short stories which are very different in nature than Yemlika's story. The one that precedes it is called "The Tale of Wardan the Butcher and the Wazir's Daughter". It is a story about a nymphomaniac, one of those pornographic stories designed to increase Shahryar's sexual appetite. But sadly, Shahryar is reminded of his first wife who was unfaithful to him and demands to hear a story "more wonderful than any" that he has heard so far (327).

The story that succeeds the tale of Yemlika is equally physical in nature and is called “Al-Rashid and the Fat”, which uses scatological humor to achieve its effect (373rd night). The placement of the tale of Yemlika between these two both increases its import as a spiritual quest, and helps bring King Shahryar down to earth by reconciling him with his physical nature again. It is a clever strategy to take off from the physical plane to the spiritual and back, because it highlights the tale in the middle while seeming to give priority to the others.

The tale of Yemlika itself mirrors the over-all structure of the Arabian Nights by having three stories in one. When we consider the convolutions of the story-telling pattern in this tale, it becomes apparent that it echoes the tale’s theme, which is descent of the hero into the underworld and his return.

The hero of the tale of Yemlika is Hasib, who accidentally gains access to the territory of the Queen of Serpents through an opening in the earth. Hasib and his friends, who are a bunch of woodcutters, discover an underground chamber in a cave in the mountains, which contains jugs of honey. His friends lower Hasib down into this chamber and ask him to send the jugs up. Hasib does as he is told, but when the last jug is lifted, his friends leave him in the underground chamber and ride away. Helpless, Hasib tries to climb up and free himself from this subterranean cell, but he hopelessly fails at each attempt. After a while, he discovers that this is only a secret passage to a yet deeper region, which is the territory of Yemlika. Having entered this territory, as he delves deeper and deeper into the earth, Hasib’s descent slowly turns into ascent, as Yemlika turns out to be the embodiment of true wisdom. She greets him ceremoniously and courteously welcomes him to her domain, offering him food, drink, and invaluable advice on true knowledge and wisdom through the medium of stories. “You may rest assured,” she says to Hasib, “that, while you stay in my kingdom, nothing unpleasant will happen to you. If you would like to spend a week or so with us beside our lake and in the shadow of our mountains, I will pass the time for you by telling you a tale which will be of use to you when you return to the land of men” (331). And she starts the tale of Bulukiya.

Bulukiya is a king of Banu Israil, who begins a quest to find the magic ring of the prophet Sulaiman. But, Sulaiman lies buried in the Isle of the Seven Seas, and to go there, he must first find the magic plant the juice of which, when “rubbed upon the soles of the feet, makes men capable of walking on the surface of the sea”(332). Only Yemlika knows where it grows, “for she understands the language of all plants and flowers, with the virtue and property of each” (332).

With the help of Affan, an old man deeply versed in magic, alchemy and sorcery, Bulukiya finds Yemlika. Yemlika warns them that theirs is a dangerous quest and that they will perish while desiring to be masters “of men and Jinn, beasts and birds”. But they do not listen to her. After several horrible adventures, they do find Sulaiman, but

the moment Affan touches the magic ring on his finger, a drop of liquid diamond drops from the ceiling and sets him on fire, reducing him “in the twinkling of an eye, . . . to a handful of dust at the foot of the throne of Sulaiman” (339).

Terrified, Bulukiya begins to run away, and on his way he has several more fantastic adventures. Finally, with the help of the king of Jinn, he is magically placed before the entrance of his kingdom. There he meets a Fair Sad Youth, and upon inquiring about the reason for his sadness, hears from him a story even more marvelous than his. This is the third story within the tale of Yemlika.

However, all the stories are bound up as Bulukiya leaves the Fair Sad Youth awaiting his death and goes back to his kingdom, never to be heard of again. Here, Yemlika turns to Hasib, and thinking that he was able to decipher the meaning of the tale of Bulukiya, says to him: “Now that you are here, O Hasib, I quite forget him and the hope that which I once had that he would return to me. You at least will not leave me so quickly, and I trust to enjoy your company for many years” (359). But, like Bulukiya, Hasib, too, expresses a desire to leave her. She allows him to go back to his home on condition that he promises never to take a bath in a public hamam for the rest of his life. Although he does not understand the meaning of this, Hasib takes an oath, because he is eager to go home.

Back at home, he is made to take a bath in a hamam, and thus the reason for this strange prohibition becomes clear: The belly of a person who has met Yemlika turns black and betrays him upon contact with water in a public bath. So, Hasib is made to admit his secret and show the passageway to Yemlika’s kingdom to the king’s wazir, who is desperate for her milk which he believes to be the cure for the king’s fatal leprosy.

Yemlika understands Hasib’s predicament and the conditions of his betrayal and agrees to give them two flasks of her milk. But, before she disappears into her kingdom, she whispers into Hasib’s ear that the first flask contains the cure for the king, and the second, a deadly poison to kill the wazir. On seeing that Yemlika’s milk miraculously cures the king, the vicious wazir wants to drink some as well in order to obtain perpetual youth and vigour. But Hasib gives him the second flask, which kills him immediately. Thereupon, the king rewards Hasib by appointing him as the new wazir and Hasib lives as a happy, respected and prosperous man until he dies.

In the tale of Yemlika, the patriarchal order of the father and the king clearly triumphs over the matriarchal order represented by Yemlika, by relegating her to the underground and thus subordinating her wisdom to the wisdom of man, only invoking her for help in distress. This has its echoes in the triple structure of the tale. Bulukiya learns about Sulaiman’s magic ring from his father and finally returns to his kingdom; the Fair Sad Youth tries to bring his fantastic dove bride within the limits of his father’s

kingdom and thereby causes her death; and finally Hasib, who is the son of the great sage Daniel, discovers his father's legacy to him, which consists of the distilled quintessence of his wisdom written on a small piece of paper. It reads: "All learning is vain; for the times are now at hand when the Elect of Allah shall show the fountain of all Wisdom to His people. His name shall be called Muhammad! Upon him, upon his companions, and upon all Believers be blessing and peace until the death of time!" (365)

This marks the beginning of a new era, when the Islamic God replaces the much older female figure of the snake-woman as the fountain of wisdom and neatly sends her to her subterranean kingdom to be sealed up forever. No wonder both Bulukiya and Hasib prefer to return to this order, refusing the chance to stay with Yemlika. The father's order is above the ground where there are earthly delights and prosperity. Although the older and more comprehensive wisdom is pushed down into the bowels of the earth, it is impossible to fill up all the crevices, from which she can always spring up, as she does in various forms in many stories all over the world. They do not know it, but both Bulukiya and Hasib owe their earthly happiness to their brief contact with Yemlika, while Affan and the vicious wazir die because they want to use her as a means for their own ambitious ends. Little do they know that ultimate wisdom is personified in Yemlika herself, that she is not a means but an end of their quest. Bulukiya and Hasib are temporarily enchanted by her, but this does not stop them from pursuing other ends not realizing that by doing so they miss the chance of acquiring spiritual enlightenment.

In the Arabian Nights, which is heavily colored by Islamic ideology, the role of Yemlika is much understated, while in the Turkish variants of this tale she emerges as a much more powerful figure, all the more reason to master and destroy her eventually, and the themes of love, exile and betrayal, which are only hinted at in the Arabic version are carefully developed.

The Turkish name of Yemlika is Shahmaran, a persian word meaning King of Serpents, but, interestingly enough, despite this name, she is still a female figure, or at best a figure whose sexuality is ambiguous. This points to the fact, mentioned earlier, that the wholeness implied by the Mother Goddess before the world was divided into male and female often finds its expression in the sexually ambiguous figure of the snake, which is both male and female because it may simultaneously be womb and phallus, capable of eternal self-fertilization.

There are also other, very significant changes in the Turkish version. The core of the relationship between Shahmaran and the male heroes is love, trust, and betrayal. She allows both Bulukiya and Hasib to return to their world, because she loves and trusts them despite the fact that, upon being discovered, she faces a very real danger— total extinction. In the Arabic version, when Yemlika realizes that she has been betrayed for the second time by Hasib, she nevertheless goes back to her kingdom—broken-hearted,

