



RESEARCH PAPER

Reading Myth as a Historical Identity: A Structuralist Reading of  
Nadeem Aslam's *Leila in the Wilderness*

Tayyeba Ashfaq

MPhil, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Lahore, Punjab,  
Pakistan

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<b>PAPER INFO</b>	<b>ABSTRACT</b>
<b>Received:</b> March 22, 2022 <b>Accepted:</b> June 28, 2022 <b>Online:</b> June 30, 2022	Nadeem Aslam's novella, <i>Leila in the wilderness</i> is interpreted to dig out the power structures adopted by patriarchal norms in the guise of myth to subvert and suppress a Pakistani girl, Leila. Myth divorces rationality from women, for myth prefers to take women as its prey to satisfy patriarchal norms. The research illustrates Simone de Beauvoir's concept of myth through her seminal work, <i>The Second Sex</i> and Ronald Barthes, <i>Mythologies</i> . Barthes considers that language is specially conditioned to create a myth. Leila becomes subservient to the myths that are neither based on reality nor they are a result of psychological or biological complexities, but those myths are attached to her historical identity. Subsequently, the quest of a female to dismantle atrocities regarding mythical hierarchal structures leads to the recuperation of her intellectual and rational being.
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<b>*Corresponding Author</b> Tayyebaashfaq84@gmail.com	

**Introduction**

Ronald Barthes illustrates a structuralized and contextualized approach to disclose the significance and the meanings of a text (Barry, 2022, p.46). The research adopts the structuralist approach to understand and decode the concept of meaning in the novella, *Leila in the Wilderness*. The study is further enriched with the addition of ecofeminism to understand the women's nature dualism, for both share the ferocity and suppression. Moreover, the historical concept of myth is extracted from Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work, *The Second Sex*, and Ronald Barthes, *Mythologies*. Beauvoir illustrates the consequences and apprehensions attached to the concept of myth and Barthes lays stress on the ways myths are constructed and become significant.

Karen Warren (2000) says dualism focuses on the conceptual and practical domination in the feminist theory. Val Plumwood (1994) notes that the destruction in a non-human world results from a hegemonic obsession with this dualism. The environmental cost of uprooting identifies women as the subjects of the change (Bianchi, 2012, p.3). Myth is the childhood of philosophy as Aristotle puts it, like for Freud art is the childhood of psychoanalysis (Kofman, 1988, p.198). The classical myth and the feminist thought function to investigate the intersections between what one is allowed to imagine and what one forecloses by rendering an imaginative device and narrative as an authoritative canon (Zajko & Leonard, 2006, p.89).

## Literature Review

Gines (2014) states that Beauvoir informs that sexism, racism and anti-sentimentalism are all comparative methodologies of oppression. Beauvoir underscores key differences existing between what she entitles anti-feminism and other forms of anti-sentimentalism. It is on these points of difference where Beauvoir establishes competing and comparative frameworks of oppression, privileging woman's oppression as a very unique and constitutive type of oppression (p.255). Levi-Strauss applies a structuralist outlook to interpret a myth. He insists that an individual's tale from a whole cycle of myths did not have an individual or inherent meaning but it can only be interpreted in relation to its position in the whole cycle. So, the comparison and contrast between the tale and other structures in the sequence are necessary to be considered (Barry, 2022, 46).

As quoted in Barry (2022), Ronald Barthes applied the structural method to the general field of modern culture. It paved a way to look at the items, which had never been subjected to intellectual analysis. Barthes adopts an approach of a classical structuralist, the individual item is 'structuralized', or contextualized by structure, and in the process of doing this layers of significance are revealed. The process of structuralism is typically moving from particular to general and places writer's work in a broader and wider structure. A structuralist reads a culture like a language as culture is made up from several structural networks through a system of codes. These codes which are symbolic, thematic, semic, cultural, symbolic, hermeneutic, or proairetic are decoded to extract the meanings. The signifying system is an organised and well structured set of codes and designs that carry cultural meanings (p.46). Barthes associates textual theory with the concept of pleasure taken against the indifference of mere knowledge (McGraw, 1977, p.943)

## Materials and Methods

Simone de Beauvoir, a French writer, and a feminist existentialist philosopher had a significant influence on feminist existentialist and feminist theories. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (2010) is a detailed analysis of women's oppression. She states, "I was a day old, and I found a little tag on my bassinet that announced, it's a girl! In the next bassinet was another newborn whose little tag announced, I am a Boy! There we lay, innocent of a distinction between a female object and a male subject that would shape our destinies" (p.8). Beauvoir says women's wings are cut and then she is blamed for not knowing the ways to fly (p.731). She needs eyes full of mystery to discover herself as a mystery. A sovereign consciousness is required to receive the confidence and to revive the faded snaps to bring out the dimple in the corner of a woman's face. She is only desirable and lovable if she is being desired and loved (p.671).

Barthes in *Mythologies* (1991) exemplifies that to become a myth language needs special conditions. These special conditions help in shifting the language from communications to messages. Thus myth acts as a mode of signification to form an idea or concept. Barthes thinks that in a particular time frame a subject becomes the prey. After some time other subjects take their place and attain the status of myth. This leads to the creation of a myth, rendering a historical outlook to the myth. The

phenomenon is then adopted by the broader aspect of the myth and is taken as a broader structure (p.107).

Ronald Barthes (1991) in the section, "Myth as a Stolen Language" utters that myth transfers the meanings to a form and robes language to accord with its own form. Consequently, the articulated language takes the form of mythical dispositions. The mythical dispositions show a sign structure that manifests the intentions behind the usage and forms of its culture and subsequently becomes a representation of the cultures of its nearby too. This is the progression of a myth that is then made even more general by other objects to come. So myths make particular general culture to a particular object. This transfers an experience intended to articulate mythology. Myth easily hints at the final meaning, the further possible meanings floating around are robbed by the final meaning and therefore a myth swells on it (p.131).

### Results and Discussion

Griffin (1978) says there is power in words and designating the names of natural things to man hints that a man can command them (p.20). All nature is designed to benefit a man (p.22). Nadeem Aslam (2010) starts the novella with, "In the beginning, the great river was believed to flow out of a lion's mouth, its size reflected in its ancient name, Sindhu, an ocean" (p.9). The story starts with the description of the river Indus and the story is set along the river. Lion is compared to the patriarchal order and the great river to the Man. The size of the river represents the power of males over females. Nadeem Aslam assigns this start to his story to introduce the hierarchy of patriarchal society. Beauvoir (2010) says that patriarchy is known to be an ancient phenomenon. Myth is not constructed through reality, psychology or any kind of biological complexity, rather it is a historical identity attached to a subject (p.28).

Barthes in *Mythologies* (1991) illustrates that to become a myth the language needs specific and special conditions (p.107). A major portion of the story is about the miracle mosque on the island and the following eruption of religious fervor spread all over the countryside. Once Taimur spreads the word that the mosque is "created by angels" all the worshippers start to spill onto the bank by Taimur's side, subsequently leading to a huge rise in his wealth and popularity (p.9). The notion to act according to the fixed beliefs of mythologies surpasses their own individuality. Myth is not considered by Beauvoir (2010) as a reality but is considered fantasy. It is not an interpretation of an individual but is created by the history (p.7). Gender roles are compared in terms of religious obligations, where the woman is bound to perform her religious duties but men are exempted from it.

Aslam writes, "One night under the vast silence of a perfect half-moon and six stars, a mosque appeared on a wooded island in the river, and Leila was woken by the call to prayer issuing from its minaret just before sunrise it was a day she was to be blessed with a son. After a few paragraphs it is told that her husband, Taimur was celebrating the imminent arrival of his first son in the company of musicians and prostitutes". (p.9)

The creation of the Mosque is kept parallel to the birth of the son, which is a flamboyant description of gender discrimination. It represents a mythical approach to religion attributed by men. Religion is structured in accordance with its profit and

myths. Religion is a concrete universal philosophy and Beauvoir illustrates myth to be an abstract idea and rather a self-created idea created exclusively for the sake own self. Myth is not a universal ideology, but it is presented as universal for personal ends. Taimur's mother comments on the construction of the new mosque saying, "These are auspicious hours. This miracle augurs great things for the boy about to be born" (p.10). In contrast, Leila's four girls are thrown into the river. Aslam writes a "few hours later a group of children running after dragonflies on the edge of a pond discovered the body of a new born girl floating in red dark water" (p.19).

Leila and her multiple female babies show the ugly underbelly of a mythical system that blames the mother and humiliates her for giving birth to a baby girl in the family where the only child having worth is a boy. The clash of ideas that exists between Islam's repugnance of death and the murder of Leila's female children does not worry her religious mother-in-law at all and neither to her husband, Taimur. Leila in comparison does not exclaim herself to be religious or morally superior but the only question she asks is about her daughters. She even accepts to elope in the hope to find her missing daughters. Dailey (2017) informs, that when a woman is challenged and threatened for infringing on male culture, they are left with no choice but to leave their house and the grieving trees (p.19).

Nature goes wild, the night Macbeth kills Duncan. Nadeem Aslam has used a Shakespearean technique of presenting nature in accordance to the situation equally well. The technique not just presents intense emotions but also structures the binaries to picturesque nature in yielding gender inequality. Leila knew there was no mosque within her locality, her initial impression was the air is singing by itself, as she is expected to give birth to a son. Nature in harmony with emotions presents those ideologies that are too historical to be labeled as myths. Nature here, unlike Shakespearean tragedies, do not present negative emotions. Negative emotions are made a part and parcel of Leila's inner self, not letting any space to be exposed. Nature is even not allowed to interfere with the conservative patriarchal norms. Leila pursued the song of faith drifting with the fifty-roomed mansion that is built by her husband's family for multiple generations. Aslam puts it, "The river with its boats and fresh water dolphins and drowned lovers was half a mile away, and there was nothing but rocky desert and thick date orchards between the river bank and the mansion" (p.9).

Warren (1997) is of the view that the Main goal of eco-feminism is the removal of male gender privilege and the power over women. Anything that helps to diminish the oppression and subordination of a woman, in any kind of setting inherently belongs to feminism. Eco-feminism is a movement that intends to show how the issues of sexism are strongly woven with the hegemonic structures of classicism and environmental ferocity, as both are dependent on the continuous hegemony of male decisiveness in the world (p.213). The myth of patriarchal power and domination contributes to the development of this male order. Consequently, they own these norms and possess them badly and wildly. Leila tries well to keep her fears within herself and doubts the possibility to deliver a daughter. As emotions cannot be limited and fixed within the methods and structures of myths, Leila moved past. The bad dream caused the girl to release a cry of fear compared to the possibility of delivering a baby girl (p.29).

Mies and Shiva (2014) write that losing sovereignty to external hegemony indicates consumption as an instrument. Strength is taken as militarized patriarchal masculine identity and patience becomes effeminate and weak (p.109). The myth of early forced marriage is presented to be an old tradition. Leila's personality is depicted in comparison to her husband's personality by Aslam when he says, "Leila was fourteen year old, thin, with grey glass like eyes and a nervous flame was always burning just beneath her pale skin. While her husband, Taimur is presented as a man of exact speech who seldom smiled even when alone and he had carried Leila away from her village to be his bride" (p.9). Men are assigned supremacy and they are given the right to practice their will but women are considered subordinated and subservient to them. Therefore the role of myth is crucial in the character development of individuals. It presents itself as a law and leaves individuals devoid of rationality. Women become subservient to the myths and subsequently to men around them.

Beauvoir (2010) illustrates that weakness is weakness in the light of the aims men set for themselves and the subjects are at the disposal of the laws he imposes (p.69). Leila's mother-in-law, Razia, is a display of the mythical conceptions passing blindly from one generation to the other. She tells Leila, that she was marked for days upon failing to conceive within a few months of her marriage. "She is presented as attenuated wheat colored face pitted with small pox scars, and every other year a doctor would inject liquid gold into her bones and joints to encounter the ravages of time" (p.10). Beauvoir (2010) pens that the body is a tool to hold the world. The body is not giving life but it risks life, titling man to be raised above the animal. For this reason, superiority has been linked to humanity and not to the sex (p.99).

Aslam pens, "Taimur heard a cry from Leila's room a few minutes before the call to the fifth and final prayer of the day sounded. He was at the door when midwife emerging from the room in a great panic ...she stumbled to her knees and then. Taimur went into the room where he saw Leila dead on the bed sheets, the crying newborn by her side. He knew she was dead, but then she made a movement and raised her eyelids to look at him. He approached and grabbed her by the hair and, lifting his free hand as high as he could, he struck her face. The minutes old baby on the bed was a girl". (p.13)

As quoted by Huggan and Tiffin (2015), violence to nature mirrors nature's dualistic capacity which actively disturbs the sensitive equilibrium of the land. He says that the song is long gone and the ritual is useless because the tribal story is lost in the alien tales (p.107). Both animals and Leila display the dualism of lacking autonomy and objectivity of women. Magically imaginative imagery of animals is portrayed by Aslam. The caged animals are also liberated when Taimur kills himself and Leila is free. Women are called irrational beings as Taimur says, "The child cannot be mine. The only explanation is that you have another man, someone inferior" (p.16). But Razia advances to rescue her saying that she knows the remedies that will correct her internal mechanisms and that she will make it up within ten months.

Any self-assertion snatches away the femininity and seductiveness (Beauvoir, 2010, p.402). A woman's sexuality is totally subservient to a man's desires. She is not allowed to practice her will. In the next month after the delivery of the baby girl, Razia supervised Leila's diet with the utmost care to prepare the girl for the day she

will be robust enough to start receiving nightly visits from Taimur. She says, "it takes one hundred drops of milk to make one drop of blood and one hundred drops of blood to make one drop of semen. So you must not misuse again something that takes so much of my son" (p.16).

Nadeem Aslam pictures relationships very well compressing the writing distance from which he illustrates them. Razia's almost fawning love for her son battles with her hatred for Leila. This is practiced all over the world as mothers give sons privilege over their daughters. The worst of Razia's ill-treatment of Leila relies on the fact that violence acts as a vicious cycle. Instead of sympathizing with Leila she condemns and criticizes Leila constantly for her inability to have male children. Myth is therefore prioritized over the individual's experience. When the umbilical cord was still not cut, Razia screwed her bony fingers around Leila's throat saying, "You little witch! Why must you ridicule and torment my son like this?" Taimur is misogynistic because he's been trained in that role very well. Within no time Razia inculcates and implants the idea in Taimur's head about her women being responsible for the ill-failings. Taimur says, "It's your fault that I am alone against him and his sons - why didn't you perform your duty as a woman and give me brothers" (p.28).

Beauvoir (2010) writes that a woman's wings are cut down and then she is blamed for not having any rationality and for not knowing how to fly (p.731). Freedom and existentialism are equally essential desires for an individual and the only way out for it becomes the survival of women. Nadeem Aslam generously uses magical realism to represent the liberation of women from oppressive structures. One striking image is that of the mother of Leila growing wings and she flies off into the sky. Leila's wings are compared to her mother's wings or maybe it was her mother who was giving her fair warning (p.42). After Leila's father's death, the area's council decided that for repayment of his debt, the moneylender's men can possess his widow one hundred times. In the early morning, the men went to the lake where Leila's mother was collecting lotus flowers in the rising sunlight mist. When they returned after an hour with the words that no one could accept as true that the wings suddenly appeared and she was about to fly (p.28). Beauvoir (2010) is of the view that today how can a girl go out alone knowing the hostility of the streets. Everywhere eyes and hands are waiting for her (p.843). Aslam writes, "A group of nine sacred men resided there for helping women to have male children. She fell asleep as hours passed, listening to the sandstorm outside the window. Her body woke in the middle of the night and she saw all nine men were approaching the bed. She fought against the nails in her clothes but didn't have enough strength to uproot herself, wanted to shout out but found her tongue paralyzed. She felt terror and ten a rage and grief the size of the sky, the rage of the damned and the abandoned, and she imagined once again her mother on the dawn lake, struggling to emerge from her body, the movement leaving a scribble of clarity in the gold and silver vapor of the lake. But Razia remarked 'I suspected right from the beginning that this girl was not a real one, of the nine men said. 'So much beauty cannot be human". (p.41)

Ronald Barthes adopts a structuralized and contextualized approach to reveal the significance and meanings of a text (Barry, 2022, p.46). The number five is mythologized. Taimur's new wife is going to give him a son very soon, and Leila is again bound to deliver a boy next time. Razia says, "It will be your fifth pregnancy

and five is a fundamental number of our own glorious religion. There are five prayers in the day, and Islam has five pillars. She gained eloquence as she talked, taste, smell, sight, touch and hearing, five external senses and five internal, common sense, estimation, recollection, reflection and imagination" (p.45). The family dagger represents myth as an ancient phenomenon and birth of history. It has been used to cut the umbilical cord of newborns of Taimur's family. Only the cord of the male newborns is cut because they have not yet witnessed a female birth in their family. Taimur later kills himself with the same dagger when he receives the news of the birth of a fifth girl from his second wife (p.52).

Beauvoir (2010) attaches existential significance to feminism in saying that a female should be free so that the future is opened to her and she can no longer be forced to linger in her violent present. Self-knowledge is not a guarantee of happiness but supplies the courage to fight for it. No one is more arrogant toward women than a man who is anxious about his virility (p.32) Qes debunks the myth and he continuously tries to find Leila. After finding her he goes to convince her. He places his musical instrument in different places to hint at Leila. Wamaq's multiple scenes of rowing boats link the Island with Leila's mansion which symbolically links Qes with Leila. The construction of the mosque is discussed from the beginning till the end of the story. The plot is structured in a way that the subplot referring to the mosque moves parallel to the main plot throughout the play. Wamaq and Qes travel through the country together and show up near Taimur's giant mansion to work for the various businesses that sprung up on the bank across the island. Here a structured approach is adopted to present the characters and their lives as intersecting facets of their past and make all the characters walk side by side. They are kept close to each other in their narratives too, even though some of them in actuality never meet.

Suffice it to say that both brothers are together and alone in the world except for each other and are willing to die for each other. They are traveling together and sleeping together and in the middle of the stories of dead baby girls and misogynistic husbands, Aslam interlaces the conversations of comfort existing among the two characters who know each other very well and love even more. This provides a sharp contrast as well as a competitive parallel between Taimur and the brothers. They are also competing with Taimur in a quest to liberate Leila from the clutches of Taimur and help Leila to find her daughters. They break the mythical conception attached to the patriarchal hierarchy and welcome Leila irrespective of the different societal adjectives attached to her. So, the relationship existing between two brothers is considered an ideal relationship in contrast to the female-male relationships presented in the novella.

## **Conclusion**

Myths are considered to be true and naturally existing and in the process to represent reality myths overtake reality itself transforming them into the absolute truth. Myths are not the truth but they are only convinced facts presented in the form of truth to utilize for oneself. Myths for women are like cages to keep them inside the bonds. Mythologies should be demythologized and a female should be considered an individual. She should be judged in correspondence with her own self. The woman is placed in a power structure of myth and is expected to obey those rules fixed by the derivative of masculinity, leaving a woman with no individual identity. Consequently, a woman is not just subservient to patriarchal norms but she is also

subservient to the myths. Myth is not based on reality, rather it is historically attached to the subject. It divorces rationality from an individual to make a woman totally derivative of masculinity, leaving her without any individual identity. Mythical representation of women illustrates how these myths imprint human consciousness to disservice women.

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