

Examining Mythopoeia in 'A Season for Martyrs' by Bina Shah

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Abstract

Bina Shah's novel *A Season for Martyrs* (2014) brings forth the history, culture, and politics of the land of Sindh in a new grandeur that gives a mythopoeic aspect to the characters that cannot be ignored. Mythopoeia (Tolkien, 1988) is the art of myth-making, that is, the creation of new myths or recreation of old and existing myths with a new luster (Tolkien, 1988). The research explores the conversion of historical and political figures and cultural heritage into mythical legends and the preexisting mythical heritage of Sindh more majestic at the hands of Bina Shah (2014). Shah (2014) has generated a mixture of mythical supremacy with ordinary humanity in her created myths that, like popular mythical heroes, are the saviors of mankind but equally contain the human side that makes them closer to humankind. Among all the mythopoeic characters is the one for whom Shah (2014) has set this whole mythical stage, that is the Eighth Queen, Shaheed Benazir Bhutto.

Keywords: A Season for Martyrs, Bina Shah, Mythology, Mythopoeia, Shah Bhattai, Sindh, Tolkien

Introduction

The term was coined by J. R. R. K Tolkien (1988) who is one of the most popular fantasy fiction writers in English literature. Since its first use by Tolkien in his poem of same title, *Mythopoeia* (1988), it has become a genre of narration in modern literature and movies.

The term Mythopoeia has its origin in the Greek Language that means myth-making (M.Campbell, 2014). Myths are centuries old and have always been an important part of literature (Segal, 2004) but Mythopoeia does not deal with centuries old myths rather it is about inventing new myths. It is human capacity of creating myths. It deals with the myths created by an author, penned down on the pages that are later read by its readers. According to Tolkien, myths are not merely inherited folklore or legends. Rather Tolkien regards myth-making as an imaginative processed. Therefore he calls Mythopoeia is the "romantic sensibility" (M.Campbell, 2014) of man who does not look at a tree just as a tree or a star just as a star (Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf: Including the Poem Mythopoeia*, 1988) but looks at them as something different, something more than ordinary. The newly invented or new myths can be a totally an imaginary object or, as Tolkien (1988) suggests ordinary objects of daily life are turned into a myths in the hands of an imaginative brain that can see beyond human boundaries.

Although Mythopoeia is dominantly is an area of fantasy literature but it has been widely explored in non-fantasy fiction. This research paper explores Bina Shah's art of myth-making in the novel *A Season for Martyrs* (2014). Researcher has examined Shah conversion of the historical and political figures into myths.

A Season for Martyrs (Bina Shah)

Bina Shah's '*A Season for Martyrs*' (2014), is the story of Ali Sikandar, an ordinary man seeking political and social change in Pakistan. In his little pursuit, Ali is forced to reconnect with his estranged father, a feudal Lord and gradually comes to understand that a common men, always become part of big change only under the lead of an uncommon leader, as he puts his faith on the strong shoulders of a leader, Benazir Bhutto (Shah, 2014). Bina Shah unfolds a series of independent chapters along with the story of Ali, highlighting the contributions of historical, political and

mystical figures of the soil of Sindh. Through theses narratives Shah reimagines saints, poets, royals and political leaders to reconstruct historical reality. This creativity provides mythic representation to these figures that is the primary focus of this study.

This research may focuses to bring forth mythopoeic structure in the cultural, historical and political gallery given in the novel. This research may also make researchers choose the Tolkien's theories for fantasy literature be applied to other genres.

Literature and Theoretical Review

Bina Shah's novel *A Season for Martyrs* (2014) does not contain much research on it, however the review of existing literature encompasses cultural, historical and Western influence on Pakistani society. Western influence has been analyzed by Mustafa (2018), who studies the dominating influence of America on Pakistani society, while Hina (2018) takes American influence on the characters of the novel is common feature of Third World countries. She analyzes the social atmosphere depicted in the novel, sufferings of Ali and concept of power to deduce that people of Pakistan and others living in Third World are being independent yet are living under American colonialism. Hina (2018) claims that in '*A Season for Martyrs*', Shah has depicted the modern ways of America to colonize and dominate an apparently independent Third World country Pakistan. Chisty (2017) believes that Western influence, especially British literature, is common in the writings of Bina Shah just like many other Pakistani English writers. Dr. Chisty (2017) has put three selected novels of Bina Shah, *The 786 Cybercafe* (2004), *Slum Child* (2010) and *A Season for Martyrs* (2014) under study to claim that all these novels, though unique in their plots, themes and style of narration have one thing in common that is the influence of English classics.

Contrary to the claims of Western influence, Shah's '*A Season for Martyrs*' (2014) has equally been studied from its rich representation and in-depth understanding of cultural heritage of Sindh, as Solangi (2025) claims the novel containing "local colours" of the land of Sindh. The researcher examines regionalism in the novel. Solangi (2025) believes that Shah has constructed Sindhi identity in the fiction of Pakistani English literature. Multi dimensional picture of Sindhi region has been drawn in the novel that equally

represents lingual, historical, cultural, social, political as well as geographical heritage of the province of Sindh. Whereas, a stylistic approach of the novel, analysis it shifts between past and present depicts both cultural and political history of Sindh and deep enrooted love of motherland in the soil of Sindh (S. Palli, S. Lakho, 2025)

Review of previous research conducted under the Tolkien's concept of Mythopoeia

Mythopoeia in spite of being the structure of fantasy literature has been analyzed in several non-fantasy literature that shows literature can create mythic meaning around non-mythical subjects. Jung (2008) has analyzed hymnal odes of 18th century as having mythopoeic structure. Researcher notes poets glorifying common emotions as legends. The poets have turned abstract ideas like melancholy or evening as mythological gods or spiritual beings thus transforming ordinary into legendary myths instead of glorifying gods of Greek mythology. The poets invoke emotions as inventive deities and abstract ideas have elevated to divine beings. Aside from Hymnal odes, Eliot's 'Wasteland' and Mehdi Akhvan Sales', Persian poem, 'Qese-e- Shahriar-e- Shahr-e- Sangestan (the story of the King of the stoned city) have been compared by Naseri and Ghansemi (2022) they claim that both poets have mythopoeic vision and both build mythic meaning around modern social and political realities. They have seen reality mythically, they have turned social decay into apocalyptic wasteland, sufferings turn into heroic tragedies with ordinary people becoming archetypal figures. These studies, along with several other, support the undertaken research that focuses on transformation of ordinary, emotional, social, historical and political realities into mythic structures.

Identification of gap

Several book reviews of the novel '*A Season for Martyrs*' (2014) review novel as a heritage of mythology but no research specifically studies the novel from its mythological aspect although the novel mixture of fiction, history, mythology and legends of the land and culture of Sindh (Clements, 2014). Shah (2014) herself calls it "somewhere halfway between a dream and a long hallucination into past" (2014). This dominating feature of the novel needs to be explored further in detail and thus creates the gap researcher intends to fill.

Research Methodology

The researcher has conducted a non-empirical research on the novel '*A Season for Martyrs*', (Shah, 2014). The research applies textual analysis through close reading, as guided by Schur (1998). It uses the plan of four steps, annotation, interpretation, coherent connections and derivation of meaning of the text (Schur, 1998). The close reading has been carried out on the text of the selected novel under the lens of the theoretical framework of Mythopoeia (Tolkien, 1988).

Discussion

The narrative structure of *A Season for Martyrs* alternates between the contemporary story of Ali Sikander and independent chapters devoted to the legendary, historical, and spiritual figures of Sindh, thus turning prose

turning into vast and broad gallery of the land of Sindh. While Ali's narrative provides the central plot, the alternating chapters construct a parallel mythic landscape that celebrates Sindh's cultural heritage. This section will discuss these narrative strands turned mythopoeic at the hands of authors imagination.

Khuwaja Khizr

Khawaja Khizr is a sufi saint (p. 15) belonging to River Indus. His shrine is in Sukkar, in the province of Sindh. Bina Shah has chosen this sufi saint of Sindh to be the first mythical figure of novel. She gathered all the miracles attributed to him to make him the most miraculous myth of the novel. Along with him she has mentioned the other four Sufi saints with their miracles as well. This way the chapter of Khawaja Khizr has five myths all together. Bina Shah mentions how these mythical figures are guardians of human. Khawaja Khizr is the guardian of water and guards the people of Sindh, dwellers of Indus river, from sky, land and water (p. 16). According to Bina Shah (2014) Khawaja Khizr rides on Palla fish, can get invisible and has been living since the time of Moses (A.S). He has drunk from the fountain of youth that has made him immortal (p. 16). Bina Shah calls these all part of his Pir-hood (p. 15).

Like any strong mythical figure, Bina Shah tells about the anger of the Pir, his "Jalal" (p. 15), that can destroy the whole city. Even Khawaja Khizr is afraid of his own anger. Bina Shah states that people of Sindh call Khuwaja Khizr seeking his help. This makes Khuwaja Khizr closer to Tolkien's (1998) believe that common men are dependant on mythical figures but Shah (2014) shows how ungrateful these seekers are towards the grants of Sufi saints like Khuwaja Khizr (p. 16). They do all the wrong deeds that Khuwaja Khizr dislikes; however, he is a selfless and kind soul, who in spite of all the wrongdoings of men, still protects them and performs rituals that only saints know (p.18). Shah (2014) says that the sailors of river Indus are well aware of the protection bestowed by Khawaja Khizr. Therefore, ofwhen Khawaja Khizr fell asleep, preachers of science the absence of Khuja Khizr as bad weather, while the sailors understood that the merciful hands of their Pir Saeen (p. 15) are no more over their heads.

Bina Shah (2014) says that Khawaja Khizr is a living saint. A mythical figure who has gotten tired of his saint duties and has decided to sleep. According to Shah this state cannot be called death because he is somewhere between the realm of life and death. He is between conscious and unconscious, it is like a never ending dream.

The Mythopoeia of Bina Shah reimagined the mystic existence of Khuwaja Khizr, a living Pir, as an ordinary human with authority over water. Like an ordinary man his eyes sore, his body ach and gets exhausted ridding Palla fish. He bleed, he is afraid of his anger and sometimes get tired of his saintly duties. He bows down in front of God, praises Him and begs for His mercy. Due to artistic visionary of Shah (2014), Clements (2014) has reviewed Khawaja Khizr as the "Mythical God" (2014) of Sindh.

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai and the Seven Queens:

The second myth of the novel is the "Man of God" (Shah, 2014) with the power to immortalize what he writes and words written by his hand are powerful enough to make

him immortal. Bina Shah (2014) has regenerated the most loved and revered poet and saint of Sindh, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai as a myth. The man from Thar said that as long Sindhi speakers exist on the face of Earth Shah Bhittai shall be known and revered (p. 27). Bina Shah writes that Shah Bhittai had elevated himself from the worldly affairs and had indulged himself in heavenly affairs as the man from Thar called it, "God's business". Bina Shah (2014) presents him as a mythical man a messenger of God and walking on the path the God has chosen for him. This chosen path led Shah Bhittai to Thar, as the man from Thar told Shah Bhittai that God wants him to go to Thar (Shah, 2014, p. 123). The reason for guiding him to Thar was because any Mythical figure that was the place where Shah Bhittai was about to meet his destiny. He met a group of seven desert women singing. These were the Seven Queens of Sindh. The Seven Queens is the collective name given to the seven brave, self sacrificing and strong female characters of Shah Bhittai. Their tales occur in Shah Jo Risalo. Their names are Marvi, Mommal, Noori, Sassui, Sohni, Leela and Heer. These seven women and their tales are immensely popular in Sindhi culture. Bina Shah (2014) has revisioned these women as mythically legends in her novel as she calls them "great heroines of Sindh" (Shah, 2014, p. 130). Though these heroines are written tales by Shah Bhittai and there existence in history is highly doubtful but Bina Shah (2014) has brought them to life, giving them physical bodies. Among these women was the mysterious Eighth Queen. Just like Khuwaja Khizr, Shah Bhittai and the seven queens are ordinary humans in their sufferings but legendary in their power of love and dedication.

Jeandal Shah

Jeandal Shah is a myth created by Bina Shah (2014) belonging to the time of Alexander Burnes, a British diplomat who made voyage on Indus River to explore it, to make the map of the veins of Hindustan (Clement, 2014). Shah (2014) brings the historical incident from 19th century, when the then Mir of Talpur was indulged in his pleasures and has given permission to Burnes to use Indus River to reach Punjab to supply Raja Ranjeet Singh the horses from King William IV. Alexandre Burnes was the man of magical words, bribes and flattery and Mir was ignorant enough to understand Burnes ambitions. Jeandal Shah, a trusted courtier of the Mir, a wise and brave man, tried to warn Mir of Burnes ambitions and became successful in persuading him. Mir entrusted the task of stopping Burnes from going through Indus River and make him choose to reach Punjab through land route. Jeandal Shah cunningly, like a mythical hero, defeated "witchcraft" of Burnes, as Bina Shah (2014, p.43) calls it, and left him no other option but to cancel his voyage trip.

Shah (2014) here writes about the weaknesses of the Mirs who were greedy for gifts. They lacked tactical analysis and trusted anyone. On one side, Jeandal Shah, a selfless soul, was ready to do anything to save Sindh and Hindustan, on the other hand, Mir of Talpur, received gifts from Alexander Burnes again and gave him permission. Burnes made his historical voyage of Indus River. History is an open book to tell the outcomes of this voyage and if there ever were

a man named Jeandal Shah he was rightfully afraid of Burnes voyage.

Mir of Talpur, believing the rumor of Jeandal Shah having affair with his youngest wife, sentenced Jeandal to be fed to Cheetah. Jeandal Shah's sword was confiscated from him, a sword engraved with the names of his forefathers and heritage of his family (Shah, 2014, p.45). Jeandal Shah's bare hand fight with Cheetah and his strangling Cheetah to death reminds researcher the popular mythical fight of Greek myth Hercules with Lion (Segal, 2004). Hercules strangled lion to death, this mythical reference makes Jeandal Shah and Cheetah's fight most mythical action scene of the novel and Jeandal Shah the mythically strongest man of the novel, strong enough to kill a beast with his bare hands and carrying its body on his bare shoulders.

As it has been stated for other myths, even Jeandal Shah is mixture of mythical and humanly attributes. His fear on seeing Cheetah and his calling out God for help makes him a common human. Like any ordinary person he got angry on receiving the reward of bravery and loyalty in shape of a Cheetah. He left the court and spent a peaceful life in village. Alexander burnes due to his wickedness is popular in his history but this hero of Sindh has become a forgotten hero.

PirPagaro

Pir Sibgatulah Shah is the sixth Pir Pagaro, who is popularly known as Suriyah Badshah (Shah, 2014, p.91), meaning the victorious and brave king. He was the leader of Hurs and had launched a strong movement against British. This historical figure appears as a mythical hero of Sindh and invulnerable foe of British.

Bina Shah (2014) writes that Pir Pagaro was popularly known as a demon or monster by enemies and an angel by his murids. British were so afraid of him that they use to say that he has the eyes of a mad man, wherever he stares he brings destruction (p. 91). Whereas, his Murids believed that he is a superhuman who can move and attack with the speed of cheetah. The one whom he targets, calamity is sure to fall upon him (p. 91). Therefore, when he was arrested the atmosphere of jail was tense and everyone was afraid. Security was doubled and so many of the guards had left their jobs. In contrast to this fearsome aura of Pir Pagaro, Ahmed, a worker at jail, found him a man in whose surrounding one is always safe and protected.

When Pir Pagaro was about to be locked in one of the cells of the jail, Ahmed thought that this small room can never hold a man who is greater than life (p. 91). Yet these small cells held this mighty man but not because the walls were strong but he had kept himself silent in the jail. Ahmed had said that Hurs, followers of Pir Pagaro, intelligence service was so fast that report can reach out in no time and kill the desired man. But Hur's leader has gotten himself arrested to save his murids who were under the possession of British and were being starved to death.

Just like other myths created by Shah (2014), Pir Pagaro is also human but a brave one who does not fear to die. Ahmed used to find ashes of cigarettes in his cell that Pir Pagaro used to smoke whole night and said that this is the only thing that shows that his trails are affecting him. Otherwise he was a

brave man with no fear of death because he knew well that he will never die (Shah, 2014, p. 92). Though he was human but Ahmed said he was the one who was worthy of the title of King. Thus Shah has presented the tale of mythical King of Sindh.

The Eight Queen

Bina Shah mentioned Benazir Bhutto as the guiding force to write the book *A Season for Martyrs* (Clements, 2014). Whereas Clements (2014) writes that not just Shah but since her martyrdom Benazir Bhutto is a subject of myth-making (2014). Shah added to this and made her the Eighth Queen of Sindh and of Shah Bhitai. Unlike any other Queen, Shah Bhitai has predicted her appearance and she will come to save Sindh (p. 127).

Parrot- Master speak about the Eighth Queen, after seeing the card parrot chose for little girl Pinky. He then told about the Shah Bhitai's journey to Thar and on his return he wrote "the epic poem" (p. 126) about the Eight Queen. Bina Shah (2014) did not mention the word epic for the tale of any other Queen. This epic shows that Eighth Queen's tale is the most heroic of all Queens. According to Parrot Master, Shah Bhitai never revealed the name of this Queen. The Eighth Queen is not just a tale but it's a prediction that she will return to save her people, to guide them, fight for love and freedom.

Shah (2014) did not mention anywhere in the novel that the Benazir Bhutto is the Eight Queen but she has given all hints in the words of Parrot Master. First of all it is popularly known that Pinky was the nickname of Benazir Bhutto (Clements, 2014). Secondly, Babu, the servant of Pinky, called Pinky an "Angrez" (p.126). Benazir Bhutto, though belonging to a Sindhi family, was raised like a foreigner. Thirdly, Parrot Master mentioned that the Queen will have to spend her life in foreign country and so are Benazir Bhutto's exiles in Britain (Clements, 2014). He also said she will lose her beloved. Shah writes that Pinky's first love was her father and Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was very dear to Benazir Bhutto (Clements, 2014). Very important hint is that Parrot Master said that the Queen will live forever as the martyrs do not die (p. 127), this statement predicted Pinky's martyrdom on 27th December, 2007.

Eighth Queen, Queen of an epic tale, will return to save Sindh and lead people towards freedom or democracy (p.126). These all statements make Benazir Bhutto a mythical hero, prophesied to do great things. About the question of the existence of any such tale, the faith and love of Parrot Master for Eighth Queen even trembled Babu, a Sindhi man and proud of his knowledge about Shah Bhitai.

Like many other myths created by Bina Shah in her novel, *A Season for Martyr*, her most important myth, Benazir Bhutto has a humanly side along with the mythical side of being the Eighth Queen. The life of Pinky and her habits are very much of human child, in fact she represents very innocent side, of the greatest and most powerful woman in the history of Pakistan. Later, at the death of her father, Shah (2014) writes that she wanted someone who could tell her simple stories of his father just to console her or to make her feel that someone, other than her, believes her father was a righteous man. On, 27th December 2007, the last day of her life, before addressing people, she was in her room. There the Benazir

Bhutto was a very ordinary woman, she missed Larkana her hometown and though she was far away from Larkana she could feel her feet connected to that land. She remembered her children (p.124). She remembered the time she went to Oxford University with her son Bilawal Bhutto and showed him around. She shared with him her memories of the lawns, halls and rooms of Oxford University. These moments make her an ordinary human who treasures memories. Next appears Benazir Bhutto as an ordinary mother. She wanted to do a lot for her people and therefore she was away from her children but along with that she also wanted to do her best as a mother for her children.

Researcher finds her preying God for help but along with that, Like Shah Bhitai, she can see the signs of God in everything around her. Through this Bina Shah (2014) shows the mythical creation of Benazir Bhutto as the Eighth Queen by Shah Bhitai and her fate leads to the same end as the Parrot Master predicted for the Eighth Queen. On 27th December 2007, she was martyred yet became immortal in the hearts of her followers and lovers because a martyr never dies (p. 127). Thus the epic tale (p. 126) of mythical Eighth Queen apparently ended but is continued to date.

The Parrot Master

The Parrot Master was an ordinary old man who was, according to Babu, in a pitiful state (p. 118). As a staunch believer of the Eighth Queen and madly in love with her he appears to be a common man but as his conversation, about Pinky as the Eight Queen, shows that he is someone who has been waiting for the return of the Eighth Queen. Therefore, his parrot without any lingering jumped right to the card with golden clown and right after predicting Pinky's future he packed his stuff and went away or mysteriously vanished (119). His words of happiness on Queen's arrival, even scared Babu who was assure that there is no such tale on the Eighth Queen.

Parrot Master and his parrot's reaction to Pinky's future and his disappearance make him most mysteriously mythical character of the novel. Even Babu felt, on his disappearance, as if the Parrot Master had only existed in his mind.

Conclusion

The term mythopoeia (Tolkien, 1998) is a method dominantly used in fantasy fiction, but any literary work that creates myths can be considered mythopoeic. Tolkien believes myth-making is an imaginative power that enables one not to see a tree just as a tree but more than it, Bina Shah has executed such imaginative visionary, in her novel 'A Season for Martyrs'. She has reimagined some of the most popular historical, political and fictional figures of the land and cultural heritage of Sindh a little more than what they originally are (2014). Through mythic imagination, these figures acquire legendary dimensions.

Khawaja Khizr, a saint traditionally associated with miracles, appear as a mythical hero living a long life to protect the people and the land so dear to him. Same goes for Shah Bhitai, a popular Sindhi poet, appears as a man of God who can see those signs of God that normal eye cannot see or cannot recognize. Jeandal Shah fought with Cheetah bare handedly as Hercules fought lion in ancient Greek. Seven

Queens physically come to life, while PirPagaro becomes a demon for his foes and an angel for his friends. Benazir Bhutto, the guiding force of Bina Shah in writing this novel (Clements, 2014) emerges as the mysterious Eighth Queen of Shah Bhitai who has come to save Sindh and lead its people to freedom or democracy. Shah (2014) has looked at all these familiar and culturally revered figures with a new fancy and has transformed them into mythical or legendary characters. They no longer remain common humans. They become self sacrificing heroes who lead their lives as saviors of mankind and the death does not kill them; in fact it makes them immortal.

The notable quality that dominates the mythic characters of Bina Shah (2014) is that they, even for one moment, do not let go of their human qualities. Despite their elevated status, they equally continue to pray to God for help, get hurt by people's wrongdoings, and they do not regard themselves as superior beings but remain deeply connected to human experience. Therefore, this research paper concludes that Bina Shah creates new myths in the novel 'A Season for Martyrs' through the creative amalgamation of fact and fiction. By transforming historical and cultural realities into a mythical narrative, the novel can appropriately be described as a work of Mythopoeia.

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Credit authorship contribution statement

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