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## **A Mythological Critique of Shamlou's Poem "Loh" Based on Ernst Cassirer's Theory of Modern Myths**

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### **Abstract**

"Loh" (Tablet) is one of Shamlou's poems in which symbols from sacred books are depicted as political actors. This article attempts to analyze this poem using the theory of modern myths by Ernst Cassirer. The results of the analysis indicate that in "Loh," the myths have a new function; the poet blends the symbols of Jesus and Moses (peace be upon them) and creates a new hero. This hero has Marxist tendencies and seeks to bring the movement of history to its conclusion and realize his ideal society.

**Keywords:** *Shamlou's poetry, myth and contemporary poetry, Ernest Cassirer's theory, contemporary poetry criticism and modern theories.*

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## 1. Introduction

Many contemporary Persian poets have used myths to express their ideas. Ahmad Shamlou is one of the pioneering poets who was heavily influenced by the Bible and Christian myths. He has written about the crucifixion of Christ twice, in two different ways (in *The Death of Nasiri* from the *Phoenix in the Rain* collection and *The Crucified Man* from the *Unrelated Hymns* collection). In addition, Shamlou uses Christian mythological elements from the Bible in a poem titled "Loh" (Tablet). Therefore, by analyzing and critiquing the poem mythologically, various layers of Shamlou's poetry can be understood. One of the perspectives that addresses mythology in the modern world is Ernst Cassirer's theory of modern myths. According to Cassirer, myths can be observed in aspects of the modern world, albeit in new and different forms. One of these aspects is politics. Cassirer believes that in the modern world, totalitarian regimes (such as Nazi Germany or Communist Russia) create new myths by altering the myths of society, and through these myths, they lead the people toward their own ideology and ally society with themselves. Since Cassirer's theory focuses on discovering myths in contemporary political discourses, it can be used to interpret many political poems that have a mythological atmosphere. As "Loh" is one of Shamlou's political poems and is written with mythological themes, it can be read and analyzed using Cassirer's theory.

### Research Question(s)

Which elements of Cassirer's modern mythology can be found in Shamlou's poem *Loh*? How are these elements applied in Shamlou's poem?

## 2. Literature Review

Ernst Cassirer, a German Neo-Kantian philosopher and mythologist, views mythical thinking as opposed to rational and logical thinking. Cassirer refers to mythical thinking as "pre-logical" (Segal, 2015: 72). In his analysis of mythology, Cassirer does not give much attention to anthropology, religious studies, or psychoanalysis; instead, "his mythology is based on the theory that myth is a specific way of objectifying the world, and myth must be understood as a symbolic form; that is, it must be seen as a particular form of experience" (Cassirer, 2014: 9). According to Cassirer, the essence of myth is emotional, not intellectual. "Myth and primitive religion are by no means incoherent, nor do they lack sensibility and reason; however,

their coherence relies more on the unity of feeling than on the unity of logical rules" (Cassirer, 2003: 42). He also believes that mythical thinking does not arise from individual imagination but rather from social experience; myth is a way of objectifying collective human experience, not an individual one (ibid: 119).

Initially, Cassirer sees myth as primitive and science as modern, but he eventually emphasizes the presence of modern myths in today's world (Segal, 2015: 73). Through his examination of Nazi Germany, he demonstrates a form of myth that belongs to the modern world. According to him, modern myths are no longer unconsciously created but are instead formed consciously, carefully, and with a premeditated plan. Furthermore, they do not grow freely but are entirely directional (Bakhy, 2016: 23). In other words, "myths are dynamic and change according to the development of realities. Myth is not a fixed and static truth, but rather a reflection of interpretation and worldview shaped by an altered reality. Myth is also joined to a belief system" (Gonzalez Perez, 2001: 7). In the modern world, the importance lies not in the myth itself, but in its function, and the primary function of myth in society is to create unity. Therefore, one could say that in *The Myth of the State*, Cassirer focuses more on the function of myth than its origin. He sees myth in opposition to logic and considers it a tool in the hands of totalitarian regimes. Based on Cassirer's views on myth and its functions, this study aims to uncover the mythical elements in Shamlou's poetry and analyze their function in political parties in pre-revolutionary Iran. Although some work has been done on analyzing mythology in Shamlou's poetry, none have examined mythology from Cassirer's perspective or explored how myth is used in directing the political parties in contemporary Iranian politics.

### **3. Methodology**

In this study, an extensive analysis of Cassirer's mythological theory is first presented, and the key concepts of this theory are explained. Then, based on these concepts, Shamlou's poetry is examined, and the function of mythical concepts within the political atmosphere of pre-revolutionary Iran is clarified.

### **4. Results**

According to Ernst Cassirer's theory of "Modern Myths," myths do not disappear in modern societies, but rather change their form. Through an examination of 20th-century totalitarian regimes, he concluded that their discourse and governance structures are a transformed version of the myths found in primitive societies. According to Cassirer,

totalitarian regimes in the modern era use myths to make their ideas and ideologies more believable. Based on this perspective, Ahmad Shamlou's poem "Loh" – which serves as a political and party manifesto – has been analyzed.

Initially, the hidden ideology within the poem was explained, followed by the decoding of modern mythical elements in it. According to the analysis, the central idea of the poem is the "movement of the world spirit" or the "movement of history," a concept introduced in Hegel's philosophy and rooted in the historical dialectic of Marxism. In this poem, the narrator is a symbol of the leader of totalitarian parties, depicted as a sacred, messianic figure. The narrator seeks to convince the people of his ideas through a prophetic discourse, encouraging them to change the existing situation and accelerate the movement of history beyond its natural course. The narrator is portrayed as a prophet, a constructed image that blends the characters of Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them). In fact, the narrator is Jesus, a messiah who has come to save. However, unlike Jesus, he is not all kindness and compassion. At first, like Moses, he is portrayed as strong and proclaiming that through power and victory, mercy and kindness should be established in society. In essence, the narrator, in some ways, resembles Nietzsche's "superman," who discards virtues like love and compassion, prioritizing qualities like pride and bravery, and after attaining such heroic traits, he then extends love and compassion.

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