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The Phoenix Rises: Archetypal Mythology Renewal in Dunya Mikhail's poem 'The Iraqi Nights'

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Abstract

This research paper explores Dunya Mikhail's poetry "The Iraqi Nights" through the lens of Carl Jung's archetypal psychology. In this poem, classical myths and their symbolic symbols have been recreated in the broken land of modern Iraq, which is broke separate by war and exile. In this poem, the image of the traditional hero goes away in place of a more difficult figure who carries the brunt of memory and loss, silently pushing their sorrow without recognition or glory. Mikhail uses mythological figures like Scheherazade, Tammuz, and Gilgamesh not to escape reality, but to bring back shared memories and deal with the psychological scars caused by violence. The hero is not a victorious warrior; he is a tired survivor who wears "half a metal heart" and "tows the hills of dust" so lightly that no one notices. This represents invisible pain and the weight of silent sadness. Through 'The Iraqi

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Nights' Mikhail asserts that healing starts with getting language and myth back. Telling stories, like Scheherazade's voice, fights against silence and gives an archetypal way to avoid destruction. The poem is not just a sad song for a lost Iraq, but also a thoughtful hymn to the power of poetry to show how people think and feel and help them survive and get better.

Keywords: Dunya Mikhail, The Iraqi Nights, Jungian Archetypes, Hero Archetype, war, Exile, Myth and Modernity.

صعود طائر الفينيق: تجديد الاساطير النموذجية في قصيدة دنيا ميخائيل "الليالي العراقية"

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الملخص

يستكشف هذا البحث قصيدة "الليالي العراقية" للشاعرة دنيا ميخائيل من منظور علم النفس النمطي لكارل يونغ، في هذه القصيدة تُعيد أحياء الأساطير الكلاسيكية ورموزها في أرض العراق الحديث المدمرة، التي دمرتها الحرب والمنفى. في هذه القصيدة تتلشى صورة البطل التقليدي لتحل محلها شخصية أكثر صعوبة تحمل وطأة الذاكرة والفقد وتدفع حزنها بصمت دون تقدير أو مجد. تستخدم ميخائيل شخصيات أسطورية مثل شهرزاد وتموز وجلجامش، ليس للهروب من الواقع بل لاستحضار ذكريات مشتركة ومعالجة الندوب النفسية التي خلفها العنف والبطل ليس محارباً منتصراً بل إنه ناجٍ مُنهك يرتدي "نصف قلب معدني" ويسحب تلال الغبار بخفة شديدة بحيث لا يلاحظه أحد. هذا يُمثل الألم الخفي وثقل الحزن الصامت ومن خلال "الليالي العراقية" تؤكد ميخائيل أن الشفاء يبدأ باستعادة اللغة والأسطورة وسرد القصص كصوت شهرزاد يُحارب الصمت ويُقدّم سبباً نموذجياً لتجنب الدمار. القصيدة ليست مجرد أغنية حزينة على عراقٍ ضائع، بل هي أيضاً ترنيمة عميقة لقوة الشعر في إظهار كيف يفكر الناس وكيف يشعرون ومساعدتهم على البقاء والتحسن.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دنيا ميخائيل، الليالي العراقية، النماذج اليونانية، نموذج البطل، الحرب، المنفى، الأسطورة والحادثة.

1. Introduction

The work of Carl Jung's idea of archetypes is used in this study. Archetypes are universal images and patterns that come from the collective unconscious and show up in myth, art, and literature. Jung (1968) called them "inherited modes of psychic functioning," which affect how people create and see things. The Hero, Mother, Child, and Shadow are important figures in psychological development, and they are often reinvented in literature. In the context of war

and exile literature, archetypes are important ways to show both personal pain and group identity. Dunya Mikhail, an Iraqi poet who was born in Baghdad in 1965 and later moved to the U.S., employs archetypal and mythological elements to talk about issues of loss, survival, and being forced to leave. Her poetry books, such as ‘The Iraqi Nights’ and ‘The War Works Hard’, show that she is very interested in Mesopotamian mythology, especially characters like Inanna, Tammuz, and Gilgamesh. These figures are not just static symbols; they become voices of strength and quiet defiance. For example, in ‘The Iraqi Nights’, Mikhail changes the Hero archetype from a winner to a wounded survivor who carries the weight of history. She employs imagery of innocence in the midst of destruction to bring out the Child archetype, and she uses myth not as a way to remember the past, but as a way to understand present pain. Within this context, the study will look into two main questions: How does Dunya Mikhail use old Mesopotamian stories to think about battle, exile, and being uprooted? And how does she use mythological characters like Gilgamesh, Ishtar, or Inanna to show her own and other people's trauma? These questions will help us look at her poetry from both a psychological and a cultural point of view.

2. Literature Review

The literature study looks at how archetypal mythology shows up and works in current Iraqi poetry, with an emphasis on Dunya Mikhail. Carl Jung's theories are the basis for archetypal critique, which looks at symbols and patterns that show up over and over again in different cultures and times. This review looks at how Dunya Mikhail employs Mesopotamian myths and archetypal figures like Inanna and Tammuz to talk about battle, exile, identity, and trauma. Previous studies have focused on her use of symbols and her feminist reconstruction of myth. This review, on the other hand, focusses on the main ideas and points out areas where her mythical connections have not been critically examined enough. Many of Dunya Mikhail's poems are influenced by what she has gone through during war and exile. relying on ancient Iraqi stories and events to help deal with the trauma and themes of bereavement and displacement. There have been many studies that look into the mythological aspects of She incorporates certain archetypes in her writing. Qualey (2013) states that Dunya Mikhail chooses not to use the conventional approaches to writing. despite her poems being heavily influenced by other areas, she has still been labeled solely as a political poet. the wars that took place in Iraq (2003-2011). The study shows how Mikhail makes use of metaphor and symbolism. themes surpass being just about political commentary. Vanasco (2014) gives an interview in the report when Mikhail, where the poet mentions her time in Iraq and the reasons

for leaving finds ways to go against censorship in her writing. We learn important things from this interview. What was going on in Mikhail's life and what problems did Iraqi poets face at the time. Khan (2015) focuses on discussing Dunya Mikhail's life as an exile. Johnson (2015) points out that Mikhail's book called *The Iraqi Nights* is concerned with the the history and culture found in Iraq. The review is not centered on archetypes, but it still discusses their place. brings out possible references to culture and history in the story. The *Testimony of Tablets* is studied by Mohammed, A.H. and Saadon (2023) Dunya Mikhail's poetry seems to relate to the history of ancient Mesopotamia. possibly the main significance of tablets is that they hold history and memories. witness. According to Schmermund (2024), Dunya Mikhail's poetry is full of war time laments. she was later known as 'The Keeper of the Flame'. The name is powerful, since it reflects a common theme. an individual who supports hope or remembers things even after terrible events. ideas of staying strong and preserving something precious. Mikhail (2024) explains this topic herself. mythology appears in her writing, she translates her own poems, and she looks at the past in her work. objects. This explains how mythology is a key part of the poet's message. her views on how it helps her when creating art. Subin (2025) observes as well Mikhail focused on Iraq's current situation when researching it with great attention. According to archaeologist, when looking at 'Her Own Cuneiform'. It brings attention to the relationship among them. the idea of archetypes from ancient Mesopotamia as well as the act of rediscovering memories and history through poetry. All of these studies indicate the presence of mythological and archetypal in literature. her poems usually contain themes of war, exile, memory, and identity. Even if some studies look directly at archetypes, others examine the subjects in a wider way. references to the use of symbolism and old traditions in the films could be looked at from the point of view of archetypes. There is not enough research that looks at the issue as a whole. This approach pays special attention to a variety of archetypal patterns and the roles they play in peoples' lives a large part of Mikhail's literary legacy.

3.Methodology

The methodology of this research will be qualitative, focusing on close textual analysis of poem by Dunya Mikhail 'The Iraqi Night'. It will employ a critical and cultural analysis approach, examining how ancient Mesopotamian myths are reinterpreted within the context of modern-day war, exile, and trauma. Primary texts will be analyzed alongside secondary sources that include critical studies on myth, Iraqi literature, and diaspora studies. The research will also involve examining the socio-political background of Iraq, to understand how historical and

contemporary realities influence the poets' engagement with myth. Through this methodology, and it will explore how myth in the works of Mikhail serves as a tool for cultural identity construction, memory preservation, and healing.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The notion of archetypes developed by Carl Gustav Jung provides a convincing prism through which to view works of literature addressing human suffering, identity, and psychological residual trauma. One of Jung's most persistent ideas is that of the Hero archetype—a universal figure anchored in the collective unconscious, defined by a road of change via confrontation with danger, decline into symbolic death, and possible rebirth (Jung, 1968, p. 135). The classic hero is reinterpreted and finally destroyed in Dunya Mikhail's forceful combat poetry. This poem presents a postmodern analysis of the futility of battle, in which the Hero carries the weight of memory, grief, and quiet rather than kills dragons and survival is a burden rather than a prize.

The opening lines of the poem ground us in the moment *before* the descent:

“In the first year of war
they played ‘bride and groom’
and counted everything on their fingers:
their faces reflected in the river;
the waves that swept away their faces
before disappearing;
and the names of newborns.” (Mikhail, 2014).

Mikhail conjures here a homey, even traditional environment. The "bride and groom" are symbolic archetypes of fullness and togetherness as much as an actual pair. Usually symbolized by family, nature, or innocence, Jungian philosophy holds that the Hero's path starts from a position of unconscious harmony. Counting on fingers reminds one of simplicity from childhood, reflecting what Jung describes as the "pre-individuation stage," in which trauma or awareness of pain has not yet split the self (Ibid, 1954, p. 72). The picture of faces mirrored in the river only to be carried away suggests right away the transience of identity and the approaching catastrophe. In classic iconography, the river frequently stands for change that

journey between states of existence. That the waves "swept away their faces" predicts the disintegration of the ego the Hero will shortly go through (Jung, 1959, p. 47).

Mikhail then propels the poem into the heart of darkness the transformation of war itself into a conscious, aging force:

“Then the war grew up

and invented a new game for them:

the winner is the one

who returns from the journey

alone,

full of stories of the dead. (Mikhail,2014).

This stanza flips the basic framework of the heroic story. In conventional myth, the Hero returns home with knowledge, success, or metamorphosis. But in Mikhail's contemporary epic, the battle has "grown up," learnt ruthlessness, and changed survival's guidelines. The new objective is to return alone, not to save others, therefore reversing the communal and redemptive character of the heroic path. Mikhail's poetry here really speaks to Jung's idea of the night sea trip that symbolic trip into the unconscious and into sorrow. But unlike legends where the Hero comes back fresh, this Hero returns "full of stories of the dead, bearing psychic weight, not treasure," (Jung, 1964, p. 111). These "stories" turn into the scars of memory, the post-traumatic remnants tormenting the survivor.

Perhaps the most powerful transformation of the Hero figure comes in the lines:

“And now the winner must

tow the hills of dust

so lightly that no one feels it.” (Mikhail, 2014).

Here the archetype is once more reversed. The survivor has to carry suffering in silence instead of flashing his glory. The picture of "hills of dust" is symbolic that of the weight of trauma as well as real, implying devastation and burial. Still, the load has to be "lightly," invisible. According to Jung (1968, p. 202), one of the main psychological functions of the Hero is to transform and include agonizing events into awareness. Mikhail, however, shows a

society that neither celebrates nor fosters this integration. Echoing the Wounded Healer, one who has suffered great sorrow but is not allowed to talk about it, the Hero suffers invisibly (Jung, 1954, p. 118). The manly warrior character celebrated throughout epic history is not this one. Rather, it is a calm, feminine endurance closer to what Jung called the "anima hero" a person who changes not through war but by enduring, remembering, and surviving (Jung, 1959, p. 91).

The next stanza adds a haunting symbol of emotional fragmentation:

“And now the winner wears a necklace
with half a metal heart for a pendant,
and the task to follow
is to forget the other half. (Mikhail,2014).

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The final stanzas depict war itself as an ancient, fading entity:

“The war grew old
and left the old letters,
the calendars and newspapers,
to turn yellow
with the news,

with the numbers,
and with the names
of the players. (Mikhail, 2014).

Here the trip ends in ruin rather than grandeur. Reduced to "numbers" in the media record of disaster, the "players" are not identified heroes but rather faceless victims. This reflects Jung's claim that civilizations devoid of trauma or recognition of the Hero's suffering enter psychological forgetfulness (Jung, 1959, p. 104). The classic fade into myth is represented by memory's becoming yellow letters, newspapers. The Hero's narrative is buried in dust rather than shared with respect. Mythologies, Jung underlined, exist to assist the mind in processing the unendurable. But here Mikhail laments the loss of myth itself: even myth is reduced to statistics in the bureaucratic cruelty of contemporary conflict.

The opening lines anchor us in the echo of a woman's voice who has survived across time:

“Five centuries have passed
since Scheherazade told her tale.
Baghdad fell,
and they forced me to the underworld.” (Mikhail, 2014).

Mikhail combines her speech with the fabled storyteller from *One Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade. Scheherazade, in Jungian terminology, is the Anima archetype—the creative, intuitive, life-giving feminine power, a psychic link between the awareness and the unconscious (Jung, 1967, p. 198). The poet identifies with this archetype not just to remember but also to rebel. Scheherazade talked to prolong death; Mikhail writes to oppose silence's erasure. The sentence "they forced me to the underworld" makes clear that narrative is a trip into communal pain rather than a dance of survival before a ruler. In both Mesopotamian myth and Jungian iconography, the underworld that dark place where one must travel to reclaim lost knowledge or soul represents the unconscious. This autumn reflects Inanna's trip, a feminine myth comparable to the Hero's search whereby the narrator must die symbolically to be resurrected as a voice of truth.

“I watch the shadows
as they pass behind the wall:
none look like Tammuz.
He would cross thousands of miles
for the sake of a single cup of tea
poured by my own hand.” (Mikhail,2014).

Embodying the Lover-Hero archetype, Tammuz is the ancient Sumerian deity of greenery, fertility, and sacrifice. In myth, he passes and falls to the underworld to be grieved by Inanna. His name has reverberated in regrets for millennia. Tammuz appears nowhere in Mikhail's poetry. He is not currently resurrecting. His loyalty is remembered not in grand battles but in the intimacy of "a single cup of tea," an act so little, so delicate it moves myth into actual human need. The premise that "cold tea is worse than death" flips the conventional hero's search for immortality. The poet searches presence, closeness, and immediacy instead of warlike acts. Jung felt that the lack of connection to myth causes modern people to often see archets in "distorted" or "symbolically reduced" ways (Jung, 1964, p. 100). Here Tammuz is fractured—longed for but never here. His ideal roles as partner, healer, and seasonal rebirth hang in mid-air.

“I would not have found this cracked jar
if it weren't for my loneliness,
which sees gold in all that glitters.
Inside the jar is the magic plant
that Gilgamesh never stopped looking for.” (Mikhail, 2014).

Mikhail calls on Gilgamesh, the legendary Hero of Mesopotamian mythology, who sought immortality following the death of Enkidu, in this magnificent poem. Gilgamesh's search, according to Jungian interpretation, marks the individuation process a road towards mental completeness including facing loss, integrating the shadow, and reconciling with death (Jung, 1954, p. 127).

One very iconic object is the "cracked jar." In Jungian terminology, cracks are

vulnerability—that shattered self through which light could pass. Loneliness helps the speaker to discover it; it suggests that psychic scars are doors to more fundamental archetypal truths. Inside the jar is not simply any artefact but the "magic plant" Gilgamesh searched for—the secret to memory, healing, or endless life. This is intimate and vital; it is no more a myth from a tablet. Claiming the plant, the speaker flips the gender myth: the woman, not the male, has the key to reincarnation.

“I’ll show it to Tammuz when he comes,
and we’ll journey, as fast as light,
to all the continents of the world,
and all who smell it will be cured
or freed,
or will know its secret.
I don’t want Tammuz to come too late
to hear my urgent song.” (Mikhail, 2014).

This section is a crescendo of classic desire. The speaker sees a redemptive trip with Tammuz as like the Jungian return of the Hero with the boon. The "magic plant" will not only heal but also reveal secrets ,functions connected with holy things in archetypal searches. Here the language becomes brilliant, epic, messianic: to scent the plant is to be "cured / or freed." Here is the poet-as-healer and storyteller-as-prophet. Still, hurry and fear tuck under this vision. "I don't want Tammuz to come too late" implies that time is brittle even in myth. The voice of women waits for testimony, not for rescue. Her "urgent song" calls to meaning as much as it laments. To sing is to recall; to remember is to become whole again (Jung, 1959, p. 106). Jung would define this as the integration of archetypal information into awareness.

The poets begin with:

“In Iraq,
after a thousand and one nights,
someone will talk to someone else.” (Mikhail,2014).

The phrase that refers to "a thousand and one nights" is rather typical. It reminds me right away of Scheherazade, the lifetime storyteller who spoke to postpone her death. Scheherazade, in Jungian terminology, represents the archetype of the Mediatrix the feminine power who use narrative to link society, oppose violence, and rejuvenate the collective psyche (Jung, 1967, p. 204). Mikhail's line's changing tone implies that the moment of survival by narrative could be ending not in death but in metamorphosis. Now, "someone will talk to someone else" a moment of hardly extraordinary human connection that, following conflict, becomes holy. Jung would define a return to individuation through collective healing as communication and recognition help the ego to occupy its rightful position in the world (Ibid, 1954, p. 92).

“Markets will open
for regular customers.
Small feet will tickle
the giant feet of the Tigris.
Gulls will spread their wings
and no one will fire at them.” (Mikhail,2014).

Mikhail reinvests Iraq's urban and natural settings in purity. One of the main rivers in Mesopotamia, the Tigris has long been emblematic of life and civilization. Rivers in Jungian archetypal perspective stand for continuity, fertility, and the unconscious flow of time (Jung, 1964, p. 110). Children playing at the river's bank have "small feet" that remember a primal balance between people and the earth. "Gulls will spread their wings / and no one will fire at them," (Mikhail,2014). changes the picture of birds often a Jungian emblem of spirit and transcendence into a painting of disrupted serenity. The basic truth that birds might fly without being confused with military targets becomes a revolutionary emblem. The denial of even birds points to the extent of violence that has permeated the collective unconscious and the great need the psyche yearns for peace (Jung, 1959, p. 105).

“Women will walk the streets
without looking back in fear.
Men will give their real names

without putting their lives at risk.

Children will go to school

and come home again.” (Mikhail,2014).

Mikhail twists the Hero's Return archetype. Jung writes historically of the Hero as one who enters anarchy and returns knowing or healing (Jung, 1954, p. 151). But here the reward is the act of returning itself—walking, identifying, education. Safety itself becomes legendary in a society traumatized. The statement "Men will give their real names" highlights the restoration of personal identity—a basic Jungian concern. The mind is driven into masks, aliases, and suppression under times of war and political persecution. Speaking one's name without fear is to recover the archetypal Self—the whole, integrated identity beyond ego and shadow (Ibid, 1968, p. 275.). Children returning safely from school, which should be the most ordinary of everyday rhythms, likewise become a ritual of security and optimism. According to Jungian philosophy, following psychic fragmentation the Self can re-establish equilibrium by means of repeated healthy rituals (Ibid, 1964, p. 118).

“Chickens in the villages

won't peck at human flesh

on the grass.

Disputes will take place

without any explosives.

A cloud will pass over cars

heading to work as usual.” (Mikhail.2014).

The poem does not hesitate in remembering the hideous chickens gnawing at human flesh a strange picture that refers to the mental distortion of archetypal homogeneity. Once part of the harmonic countryside paradigm, animals are here converted into post-war grotesqueries. Images like a cloud moving over vehicles show the return of this harmony. This soft picture is really important. In Jungian symbolism, clouds stand in for transitional moods or the presence of the numinous that scarcely apparent descending of serenity (Jung, 1964, p. 74). Routine that is, "heading to work as usual" becomes a legendary event once more.

The last archetypal vision of this poem revolves on the picture of a hand waving: the healing power of farewell and recognition. At thresholds crossing rivers, gates, or roads the Hero is either hailed or sent away in mythological architecture. Mikhail calls upon the archetypal of transition and gives it ordinary human gesture, therefore reinstating the custom of coming and departing.

The poem closes with:

“And every moment

something ordinary

will happen

under the sun.” (Mikhail,2014).

This captures the essence. Mikhail creates a myth of the Ordinary, thereby recovering the mythical Eden not a paradise of grandeur but one of safety, regularity, and presence. Under the sun, inside the field of awareness, Jung (1959) underlined that in times of psychic collapse the restoration of archetypal equilibrium starts not with revelation but with rhythm with things unfolding “as they should.”

5. Conclusion

This study has looked Dunya Mikhail’s *The Iraqi Nights* through the lens of Jungian archetypal theory, revealing how ancient Mesopotamian myths are reimagined to articulate the psychological wounds of war, exile, and trauma. Mikhail redefines the Hero archetype as a silent survivor rather than a triumphant warrior, using symbolic figures like Scheherazade, Tammuz, and Gilgamesh not to escape reality but to confront it. The analysis has shown that Mikhail uses ancient Mesopotamian myths not only as cultural heritage but also as a way to tell stories about the emotional cost of conflict and the fragmentation of identity. This answers the first research question about how Mikhail uses these myths to think about war, exile, and displacement. In her poems, myths come back to life as living symbols that speak directly to the scars of Iraq’s recent history. For the second question how, she reimagines mythological figures like Gilgamesh, Ishtar, or Inanna to show personal and group trauma Mikhail doesn’t make these characters perfect; instead, she changes them through the prism of loss, endurance, and quiet courage. Gilgamesh is no longer looking for eternal glory; instead, he is looking for broken memories. Inanna is called upon throughout the plunge into communal mourning, and

Tammuz is not wanted as a saviour but as a sign of close human connection. Mikhail shows that modern poetry can still use myth to describe deeply rooted human experiences and bring meaning back to life after a disaster by using subtle images and reoccurring archetypal motifs. In the end, *The Iraqi Nights* shows how telling everyday events with legendary depth can bring hope and continuity to a broken world.

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