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Original Research Article

The Role of the Mythological and Ritual Elements of Water and Rain-Seeking in the Film The Cow

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Abstract

Introduction: Gholamhossein Saedi's short story "The Cow" and its cinematic adaptation directed by Dariush Mehrjui incorporate a wide range of mythological elements and symbols. Although a limited number of studies have examined certain symbolic components of the story from the perspective of mythological signification in isolation, no independent research to date has focused on the prominent presence of elements and symbols associated with the myth of water and rain-seeking rituals, nor has it sought to analyze and explicate their position in relation to the film's central thematic core. Consequently, a closer scrutiny of these elements raises the principal research question: "What meanings do they convey, and what role do they play within the film's narrative"? Accordingly, the aim of this article is to identify these elements, analyze their semantic implications, and ultimately elucidate their relationship with the main thematic foundation of the story.

Research Method: This study employs a qualitative, case-based inquiry conducted through a descriptive-analytical approach. Adopting a holistic perspective, the analysis relies on the film's dialogues and various sequences in order to achieve the research objectives.

Findings: From a mythological perspective, the entire narrative of "The Cow" appears to be structured upon a deliberate and coherent progression of mythological and ritual elements associated with the concept of water and rain-seeking. The narrative begins with a rain-seeking ritual in the sequence related to "Moosorkheh"; it reaches its climax with the sacrifice of the cow and the accompanying ritual mourning ceremony, which is symbolically linked to water, fertility, and rain-seeking; and it concludes with the celebration of a wedding ceremony, as a symbol of renewal and regeneration, followed by the advent of rain.

Conclusion: It appears that in the film "The Cow", elements associated with water and rain-seeking are employed to represent the confrontation between two opposing realms, Boluri and Bayali, which, according to the film's creators, constitute the work's central thematic foundation. In a similar manner, within Iranian culture, the opposition between water and aridity, which forms the basis of an Iranian worldview structured around binary oppositions, has been transformed, in its epic manifestation, into the dichotomy between the "Iranian (self)" and the "non-Iranian (other)".

Keywords

Myth of Water; Rain-seeking Ritual; Fertility (Blessing-Seeking) Ritual; Bayali-Boluri Opposition; Self-Other Dichotomy; The Film The Cow

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Introduction and Problem Definition

Gholamhossein Saedi, a renowned figure in contemporary Iranian literature, is among the most authentic writers of international repute who, across a wide range of works, including plays, short story collections, novels, screenplays, and ethnographic and social monographs, has consistently demonstrated a profound and distinctive engagement with the myths, beliefs, and rituals of Iranian culture. Through this sustained focus, his works have attracted considerable scholarly attention. Among his writings, the short story collection "The Mourners of Bayal" holds a special position, as it prominently features mythological and ritual elements and concepts, particularly in its fourth story, entitled "The Cow".The story "The Cow" revolves around its central character, Mashd Hassan, who owns the only cow in the village of Bayal, from whose milk all the villagers benefit. One day, this cow, of which Mashd Hassan is madly and obsessively fond, dies for unknown reasons. Mashd Hassan's wife and the other villagers, fully aware of the intensity of his attachment to the animal, seek a way to confront him with this reality. Based on the decision of the village elders and wise men, they bury the cow's carcass in the cow pit of his house and lead Mashd Hassan to believe that the cow has run away. He, however, does not accept their account and remains convinced that his cow is still alive. From this point onward, Mashd Hassan's psychological transformation begins to the extent that he comes to regard himself as a cow and exhibits bovine behaviors. Even after he is eventually told that the cow did not escape but died, his condition deteriorates further.Ultimately, the village elders decide to take Mashd Hassan to the city for treatment; however, he escapes, and the story concludes with his fall into a ravine. In general, it can be said that "The Cow" has been presented in three independent forms: The book, the screenplay, and the film. These include: 1. the fourth story of "The Mourners of Bayal", written by Saedi in 1964; 2. the screenplay "The Cow": A Story for Film, authored by Saedi; and 3. the feature film "The Cow", directed by Dariush Mehrjui and produced in collaboration with Gholamhossein Saedi, which was first screened in 1969. The main subject matter, characters, and most narrative actions in all three forms are fundamentally derived from the short story "The Cow" in "The Mourners of Bayal"; nevertheless, notable differences also exist among them. In the present study, the film "The Cow" is examined independently of the other two forms, both because of these differences and due to the specific nature of the cinematic medium, which, compared to the written text, whether book or screenplay, offers more extensive detail and visual description, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of the semantic implications of the narrative elements. Given that the film "The Cow" contains a considerable number of symbolic and mythological elements, the need for an independent study from the perspective of identifying and interpreting mythological symbols and signs is further justified. Attention to the film's various sequences and scenes, as well as its characters, actions, and symbolic signs, suggests that from beginning to end the film is marked by the purposeful presence of elements and symbols related to the myth of water and rain-seeking rituals. This observation gives rise to the central research question: "In light of the film's principal thematic foundation, how can the reasons for employing these elements be understood and explained"? Accordingly, the identification of these elements and the interpretation of their semantic implications, considered in relation to the film's theme and central motif, which also received particular emphasis from the director, constitute the primary objectives of this research.

Research Method

The present study is qualitative and adopts a case-study approach, focusing on the film "The Cow". Using a descriptive-analytical framework, it examines qualitative data through

documentary research in order to arrive at interpretive inferences. Accordingly, the study undertakes a comparative analysis of sequences, characters, and dialogues, based on the film itself, on the one hand, and discussions related to the myth of water and rain-seeking rituals, drawing on written sources, on the other. Through the comparative description and interpretation of the characteristics and attributes of the identified elements, the research seeks to elucidate their semantic implications from the perspective of myth and ritual. Ultimately, this qualitative study, which benefits from internal validity, endeavors to present new findings and an alternative interpretive reading of the selected case study for scholarly evaluation, relying on documented and substantiated propositions.

Research Background

The available surveys indicate that numerous studies, adopting diverse approaches, have examined and analyzed the story "The Cow". Among these approaches are sociological and cultural analyses, which regard the work as a reflection of Iran's social and cultural conditions in the 1960s. Psychological analyses have focused on the crisis of identity and the psychological disintegration of the main character, while anthropological interpretations have addressed concepts such as metamorphosis, alienation, and Eastern mysticism. In addition, several studies have explored the extent to which the film "The Cow" adapts Saedi's original short story, approaching the subject as an inquiry into the relationship between film and literature. Among the available studies and film critiques, two research articles and one film review are more closely aligned with the approach of the present study, namely, symbolic and mythological analysis. The first article, entitled "The mythological analysis of Gāv, based on the archetypal role of cow in the Iranian mythology", by "Taheri" (2020), examines the religious and mythological themes of the screenplay "The Cow". This article primarily focuses on analyzing the archetype of the cow and interpreting its symbolic meaning based on the narrative of Gavaevodata in Zoroastrian mythology and creation myths. The second article, entitled "Tracing the Mythical Cow in Iranian Cinema: An Example of Myth-Based Criticism," by "Touserkani and Sarraf" (2022), examines the films "The Cow", directed by Dariush Mehrjuei, and "Qeysar", directed by Masoud Kimiaie, through a myth-centered critical framework. This study concludes that both films constitute modern reinterpretations of the myth of bull-slaying: The former is closer to the Iranian version (the Zoroastrian myth), while the latter aligns more closely with the Roman version (European Mithraism). The authors argue that the narrative of "The Cow" bears a striking resemblance to the story of the beginning of creation in the Iranian-Zoroastrian tradition, not only in its main narrative line but also in many subsidiary elements, which parallel the myth of Gavaevodata. The final review is a brief essay by "Narges Qanavati" (n.d.), entitled "Criticism of the Film "The Cow": Being a Cow Is Better Than Being Human", which offers a mythological critique of the film "The Cow". By referring to the symbolic meanings of certain elements and characters, the author concludes that Saedi and Mehrjui, "with full mastery of the myths, beliefs, and thought patterns of the people, have employed these symbols and rituals in the simplest possible manner to remind us that, in truth, each of us can represent an interpretation of the symbol of the cow and of life". Overall, it can be stated that in the aforementioned studies, given the film's title and the centrality of the cow, the primary emphasis has been placed on the concept of the mythical cow, particularly Gavaevodata, and its association with creation and regeneration. Although these studies refer to the symbolic and mythological meanings of certain elements and characters, such analyses remain relatively limited and cursory in comparison to the central focus on the cow, and are often presented without an intrinsic or systematic connection among the elements discussed. On this basis, the present research may be considered novel in two

respects: First, no prior study has analyzed the film's elements and characters, beyond merely the cow and Mashd Hassan, from the perspective of the myth of water and rain-seeking rituals; and second, this study examines the symbolic and mythological meanings of elements and characters not in isolation, but within an interconnected framework grounded in the film's central thematic foundation.

Theoretical Structure

According to scholars, Iranian culture has historically been shaped by the aridity of its land, which has prevailed over it for millennia; consequently, water and fertility (blessing) have always constituted the most critical concerns of this region. All forms of sacrifice, whether the killing of a totem, a human, or a vegetation deity, and ritual practices are, in one way or another, connected to the issue of bestowing fertility. Therefore, not only myths but also rituals possess a central core of fertility, encompassing the fertilization of the land and the destruction of forces that negate fertility. In this worldview, the death of the world-God signifies drought, while the god's renewed life is manifested in the return of rain (Bahar, 1998, 261-263, 271, 306-313). In Iranian myths and legends, the opposition between drought and humanity's confrontation with it is a constant theme. The impact of this concern, along with the longing for water and the practice of rain-seeking, is so profound that even the dualistic worldview of ancient Iranian religious and ritual thought, founded upon the two opposing principles of good and evil, may be regarded as influenced by it. Within this system of belief, benevolent phenomena, such as rain, were attributed to the gods, while malevolent forces, including aridity, were ascribed to demons (Moein, 1947, 32). The mythological confrontation between the dragon of drought and the hero or God of fertility represents another manifestation of the irreconcilability of good and evil in ancient thought and in the religious and ritual beliefs of the epic age (Beyzaei, 2012, 40). In Iran's national epic tradition, the opposition between the two primordial principles of good and evil is expressed as the conflict between two antagonistic ethnic groups, referred to in the epic narratives of the Avesta as "Iranian" and "Aniranian", and in the Shahnameh as "Iranian" and "Turanian" (Sarkarati, 2023, 99). This concept appears to be so deeply embedded in Iranian culture that it can also be traced in the film "The Cow", one of the works of the Iranian New Wave, in the form of the opposition between the Bayalis (the self) and the Boluris (the other). Evidence for this claim can be found in a 1972 interview conducted by the French critic Gérard Langlois with Dariush Mehrjui, in which he emphasizes that the subsistence-related issue of the cow and its importance for nourishment constitutes one aspect of the story, but that more significant than this is the portrayal of the confrontation between two opposing realms; the realm of the villagers' sensibilities and the realm of the outsiders (the Boluris), whose presence, despite its invisibility, is a source of anxiety for the village (National Archives of Iran, 2021). On this basis, a further hypothesis may be formulated: just as the opposition between water and aridity led to the formation of a dualistic worldview and, in the transition from myth to epic, resulted in the dichotomy between Iranian and non-Iranian forces, it appears that the film "The Cow", in a reverse process, employs symbolic and mythological elements associated with the opposition between water and aridity in order to depict the confrontation between the two opposing realms of Bayal and Bolur. In what follows, the semantic and mythological implications of the film's elements and characters, as shaped by the issue of water and rain-seeking, are analyzed.

The Three Boluris as Symbols of the Dragon of Drought

The villagers of "Bayal" fear the inhabitants of another village called "Bolur" and regard seeing them as an omen of misfortune. In the film, the Boluris appear in various scenes as a three-person group referred to as "the ever-present trio". First, during the washing of Mashd Hassan's cow at the spring, three Boluris, each with a knife tucked into his belt, are seen standing on top of a hill, and the following day, Mashd Hassan's cow dies. Second, after the villagers inform Mashd Hassan that his cow has gone missing, and he refuses to accept this claim, he goes up onto the roof of his house and declares that the Boluris are going to come that night and steal his cow. That same night, three Boluris, holding sickles, came to Mashd Hassan's cowshed with the intention of stealing the cow. Third, when Mashd Hassan is being taken to the city, three Boluris, again with knives at their waists, are seen in two separate scenes, which ultimately lead to Mashd Hassan's death. In this context, the presence of knives in the scenes preceding the death or sacrifice of the cow and of Mashd Hassan, as well as the appearance of the sickle (especially after the cow's sacrifice), is particularly noteworthy. These elements may evoke the ritual of cow sacrifice and the quest for fertility in Mithraic culture (performed by the god Mithra), as well as its transformation within Zoroastrian culture (attributed to Ahriman). In the act of sacrificing the cow, the god Mithra holds a knife or dagger, and afterward harvests and carries the crop that emerges from the cow's blood with a sickle (Asgari et al., 2020). The characteristics of the three Boluris appear to recall the mythical figure of Aži Dahāka (Zahhak in the epic tradition). First, their physical configuration evokes descriptions of Aži Dahāka as possessing three heads, three snouts, and six eyes; the three Boluris standing together function symbolically as three heads, three snouts, and six eyes. Another essential feature is their status as outsiders and "others", a point that Mehrjui himself emphasized. Just as Aži Dahāka, as the dragon of drought and destruction (the force of evil), stands in opposition to water and prosperity (the force of good) and, in epic literature, is transformed into the figure of Zahhak, a non-Iranian, foreign, and tyrannical king. The Boluris[1] in the film likewise appear as outsiders whose presence is demonic in nature. The impulse toward destruction is a defining trait of Zahhak or Aži Dahāka, as the offspring of Ahriman, who seeks to annihilate humanity and everything that exists on earth (Hinnells, 2002, 82-83; Pourdavood, 1998, 249). This harmful and demonic nature is also evident in the Bayalis' descriptions of the Boluris: "They have no proper religion or faith", "If they get the chance, they steal; otherwise, they ruin things", "Tonight the Boluris have joined forces and want to come and steal my cow", and "If the Boluris find out, they'll come and steal you; they'll cut your head off". Ultimately, it appears possible to trace the myth of dragon-slaying, the story of Zahhak, and the uprising against him led by Fereydun and Kaveh in the epic tradition, as depicted in the film "The Cow", particularly in the scene showing the villagers' revolt against the Boluris. The villagers, who had previously feared the Boluris and felt powerless to confront the harm they caused, drove them out of the village one night under the leadership of Mashd Safar's son. A noteworthy point is that Mashd Safar's son pursues the Boluris ahead of the others and is the one who carries a pickaxe, while most of the villagers are armed with sticks. Mashd Safar's son, wielding a pickaxe as a forged, blacksmith's tool, recalls Kaveh the Blacksmith, who stands at the forefront of the uprising against Zahhak . According to Hosseini (2022, 80), the myth of Kaveh represents a narrative transformation of the myth of battling the dragon of drought in the Iron Age. Accordingly, the uprising of the Bayalis against the Boluris may be understood as an evocation of the myth of dragon-slaying and the epic of revolt against Zahhak[2]. In this epic framework, the Boluris, in their epic dimension, are identified, like Zahhak, as the other; foreign and tyrannical, while in their mythological form, they signify the dragon of drought.

Moosorkheh and the Rain-seeking Ritual

In the opening sequence of the film, Moosorkheh, a simple-minded individual who is mocked by the villagers, especially the children, is introduced. He is tied to a tree beside a pool, surrounded by children, while Mashd Safar's son blackens his face with soot. A hat adorned with bells and pins is placed on his head, and bells and tin cans are tied around his neck and legs. A bundle of wheat ears is tucked into the pocket of his jacket, serving as a pocket square. The villagers observe the scene with somber expressions. With all its features and signs, this scene immediately evokes, for an informed viewer, rain-seeking ceremonies and rituals, including the Kuseh-gardi ritual. In the Kuseh-gardi ritual, a person is dressed in a grotesque manner, and a bell, whose attachment is a defining characteristic of the kuseh figure, is hung around his neck. He then walks through the alleys, followed by children, while people pour water over him (Zolfagari, 2016; Mirshokraei, 2001, 83). Similar actions occur in the case of Moosorkheh. In this ritual, blackening the kuseh's face symbolizes death and is understood as the reason for his return from the realm of the dead to bring rain and fertility (Bahar, 1998, 264-265). In general, this ritual practice is associated with fertility, the request for abundance, and rain-seeking, and it is intertwined with other rain-seeking ceremonies and customs related to the rain doll (Mirshokraei, 2001, 83, 94-95). In the subsequent scene, children run through the alley carrying torches; two torches are held in front of Moosorkheh, frightening him. Terrified, he flees toward one of the alleys. At the same moment, a young man suddenly appears in front of him, holding a doll or a scarecrow. Moosorkheh retreats in fear and suddenly falls into the pool. Mashd Safar's son strikes him in the water with a long stick, and the children splash water on him. A voice is heard saying, "Kids, hit him… kids, splash water on him". Eventually, through the mediation of the village headman (kadkhoda), the beating and harassment are brought to an end. The elements of this scene, including the central role of children as the main participants, the acts of chasing, beating, pushing into the water, splashing water, and the act of mediation or intercession, are also present in many rain-seeking rituals. This is evident in descriptions of rain-invoking ceremonies in Esfarjan (Isfahan), Natanz (Kashan), Zarand (Kerman), the Kuseh Kuseh ritual in Kermanshah, Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, Galin in Borazjan, Mamasani (Fars), Chah Anjir and Seyfabad (Sarvestan), the Baseri tribe, and Meymand (Fars) (KhalatbariLimaki, 2023, 10-12, 24, 27, 30, 35, 48, 65-69; Bashgoz, 1979). At the end of this sequence, at night, the burnt doll or scarecrow is seen hanging beside the pool. The presence of a scarecrow or doll, and ultimately its burning, are among the distinctive features of rain-seeking rituals, particularly those involving the rain doll. The rain-seeking doll, known by different names in various regions depending on ethnic and cultural contexts, is regarded as "a symbol of Anahita, the goddess of water; sometimes, at the conclusion of the performance, the local people burn it and consign its ashes to the water". Splashing water is also considered a crucial element in these ceremonies, and the participation of the entire community, especially women and children, plays a central role (Zolfagari, 2016; Neshatizadeh, 2018). The significance of the presence of women and children in these rituals underscores their association with the goddess Anahita, a connection that is also evident in the features and elements discussed above. In the final shot of this sequence, Naneh Khanoom, one of the two black-clad elderly women whose association with water will be examined later, rises and moves toward Moosorkheh, striking him with her cane. This chase and beating may be interpreted as a symbolic act of expelling drought and barrenness. Moosorkheh also appears in several other sequences. In one such scene, he escapes from the ruined mill in which he had been confined in order to prevent him from informing Mashd Hassan of the cow's death. Beating rhythmically on a tin can, he walks through the alleys while children run after him. This scene evokes the myth of

death and resurrection, specifically the annual death of vegetation and its subsequent rebirth. As noted, "the killing of the hero in this myth sometimes takes the form of martyrdom, sometimes immersion in fire, exile, or imprisonment in a dark well or pit. All of these symbolize the concealment of the seed in the earth, while the hero's return from the underworld, emergence from fire, or release from exile, prison, or the well symbolizes resurrection or renewed growth and vegetal fertility" (Jafari & Talebian, 2009). In another scene, Moosorkheh ties a broken water jug to his leg, and once again, the same sequence of moving through the alleys and being pursued by children is repeated. This repetition appears to signify further references to the aforementioned rituals and their associated semantic implications.

The Cow (Mashd Hassan) as a Symbol of Sacrifice in Fertility and Rain-seeking Rituals

Mashd Hassan is the owner of the village's only (female) cow, to which he is deeply attached. The village's milk supply depends entirely on this cow, as illustrated in several scenes of the film in which women are shown holding bowls and waiting to receive milk. Mashd Hassan's cow thus functions as a symbol of the village's fertility, and the fact that it is pregnant further underscores its generative and reproductive aspect. The female cow, as a producer of milk, symbolizes the life-giving earth (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 2006, 670) and held particular importance for the Aryans, to the extent that such cows were dedicated to the temple of Anahita, and only these female cows were used for sacrifice in those sanctuaries (Anasori, 1969). On the other hand, water plays a crucial role in the relationship between Mashd Hassan and his cow. Throughout the film, water is either directly referenced or emphasized through related elements such as the moon, which, beyond symbolizing fertility, also evokes Anahita, the goddess of water and rain-seeking. Examples include scenes such as the washing of the cow in the spring and Mashd Hassan's affectionate interaction with her, as well as dialogues concerning giving water to the cow, such as: "Did you give the cow water?", "If one day I'm not in this ruined place, should an animal die of thirst?", "When I went to bring her water, I saw her lying stretched out, with a lot of blood coming from her mouth", or when Eslam asks Mashd Hassan, who has come to believe himself to be a cow, whether he wants him to bring anything, and he cries out: "Waaater!" The connection between the cow and the moon is further emphasized in one of the film's well-known lines: "When the moon comes out, I'll bring her water. What if the moon doesn't come out? Whenever my cow gets thirsty, the moon comes out too". In the film, the uniqueness of Mashd Hassan's cow in the village, reinforced by the kadkhoda's line, "There's only one cow in this village", together with the emphasis on water and its association with the moon, recalls the mythological motif of the primordial, uniquely created cow and the Iranian creation myth. Previous studies have likewise reached a consensus on this point (Taheri, 2020; Touserkani & Sarraf, 2022). Just as in Zoroastrian thought, after the creation of the world by Ahura Mazda, Ahriman attacks livestock and the creations of Ahura Mazda, including the primordial cow and the first man (Sarkarati, 2023, 245-246), in the film both the cow and Mashd Hassan, in different ways, become victims of demonic forces (identified by the villagers as the Boluris). The sudden death of Mashd Hassan's cow and the flow of blood from its throat closely resemble the sacrificial killing of the cow in the creation myth. In that myth, after the cow is slain by Ahriman, its seed ascends to the moon, and when this seed becomes fully purified, numerous species of animals emerge from it due to the cow's vegetal nature (Farnbagh Dadagi, 2016, 46). This theme can be explained in relation to the opposition between drought and abundance, as well as the centrality of water (Ghaemi, 2012). In fact, the sacrifice of the cow or the

shedding of its blood for the improvement or abundance of crops has existed since ancient times and inherently presupposes a connection with the sky and water (Khazaie, 2015, 294). It should be noted that in certain rain-seeking rituals, the sacrifice of a cow constitutes the central component of the ceremony. Examples include rain-invoking practices in Kerman, the Boukeh-baran ritual in Kurdistan, and the custom of going to the mosalla, performing lamentations, and sacrificing a cow in the villages of Ahar in Azerbaijan (KhalatbariLimaki, 2023, 25, 34, 55-56), as well as the ritual of vowed cow sacrifice in regions such as Esfenjan and Cheshmeh-Ali. "Bastani Parizi" maintains that the close association and affinity between Anahita and the cow gave rise to customs of cow slaughter and cow sacrifice at shrines and temples dedicated to her. Anahita's connection with the cow led people, during times of drought, to sacrifice a cow in the hope that rain would fall. In effect, through this act, they sought to provoke the rain deity (Bastani Parizi, 2001, 246-247, 331, 366). At this point, it is necessary to note that the film "The Cow" appears to align more closely with the Zoroastrian interpretation of the cow's sacrifice, namely, the slaying of the Gavaevodata by demonic forces (the force of evil), rather than with the Mithraic interpretation, in which Mithra himself (the force of good) performs the sacrifice of the cow (the primordial bull). Consequently, it may be inferred that the ritual practices of cow sacrifice and cow votive offerings for rain-seeking in folk culture bear greater affinity with the Mithraic interpretation. Nevertheless, the crucial point is that in both traditions, the outcome of sacrificing or being sacrificed as a cow is fertility, abundance, and the bringing of rain. Thus, the "Gavaevodata" in Zoroastrian culture, like the "primordial bull" in Mithraic culture, ensures life for the world through its death (Ghaemi, 2012). In the film, following the cow's death, Eslam proposes that its body be buried in the cow pit in the courtyard of Mashd Hassan's house. This act may also recall the casting of Siyavash and Joseph into the well. Entering the well signifies the realm of the dead, the underworld, and drought, while emerging from the well symbolizes the renewal of life (Bahar, 1998, 269). Some scholars regard Siyavash in the Shahnameh as the epic manifestation of the myth of the Gavaevodata, noting that vegetation also grows from Siyavash's blood, and that both figures are associated with the moon and rain-bringing (Aghabeygipoor et al., 2020). In the film, after the cow is buried in the pit, a mourning ceremony is held for it, reminiscent of the lamentation for Siyavash, which is itself associated with fertility and rain-seeking rituals. Based on the film's scenes, after the cow's death, its soul appears to incarnate in Mashd Hassan, who loved it devotedly, and he begins to exhibit cow-like behaviors. Mehrjui interprets this state as the "union of the lover and the beloved", inspired by the mystical concept of the union of the intellect and the intelligible in Islamic Sufism: "I tried to embody this state in a religious atmosphere with a sign of light descending from the sky. In this way, the 'phenomenon of union' was represented" (National Archives of Iran, 2021). On the basis of this interpretation, it may be argued that "Mashd Hassan's cow" and "Mashd Hassan as a cow" are, in essence, one and the same. In the scene in question, Mashd Hassan, psychologically collapsed, looks toward the opening at the top of the cowshed and says: "Mashd Hassan! The Boluris have stormed in here. They want to throw me into the pit and cut off my head. Mashd Hassan, come to the aid of your cow". This dialogue recalls the conversation between Geush Urvan and Ohrmazd: "When the Gavaevodata passed away, it fell on its right side… Geush Urvan, the soul of the Gavaevodata, left the cow's body and stood before it… and complained to Ohrmazd, asking to whom he had entrusted the lordship of creation, for the earth trembled, plants withered, and the waters were afflicted" (Farnbagh Dadagi, 2016, 53). This cinematic dialogue, with its emphasis on the killing of the cow, beheading, casting into the pit, and attributing these acts to the Boluris, may signify drought and barrenness, just as in the dialogue between the soul of the cow and Ohrmazd following

Ahriman's assault and the cow's death, emphasis is placed on the affliction of the waters and the drying of vegetation. At the end of the film, the union between the cow and Mashd Hassan leads to a shared fate for both. In the final sequences, Mashd Eslam, Abbas, and the kadkhoda attempt to take Mashd Hassan to the city for treatment, but he resists. Mashd Hassan escapes from them and is thrown from the top of a hill, where he dies. This scene recalls the sacrifice of the cow by the god Mithra. "In the Mithraic narrative, the cow flees from Mithra; Mithra pursues it, seizes it, and slaughters it so that fertility may result. A similar custom exists among the Yezidis of Kurdistan, and in Yazd as well, where every year during the festival of Mehrgan, a calf was thrown from a height to its death; an enactment of the Mithraic story" (Bahar, 1998, 302). In the film's final scene, abundant rainfall is shown, as though from the very beginning of the film up to this moment, various rituals had been performed to invoke it, and with the sacrifice of Mashd Hassan, the cycle is completed. It may thus be suggested that just as the outcome of cow-slaying rituals and cow sacrifice is fertility and rain, the sacrifice of Mashd Hassan's cow, and ultimately his own death, completes the sacrificial cycle, and rain finally descends upon the village.

Naneh Khanoom and Naneh Fatemeh as Symbols of Women Associated with Water and Rain-seeking Rituals

Two elderly women, clad in black, appear repeatedly throughout the film. According to the story and the screenplay, their names are Naneh Khanoom and Naneh Fatemeh. More than any other women, they are responsible for organizing and conducting collective rituals and ceremonies, including rites of averting misfortune, mourning, and weddings; ceremonies whose presence is symbolically intertwined with the element of water. In the scene where Mashd Hassan's wife wails and laments over the cow's death, Naneh Khanoom gives her water while uttering bismillah and sprinkles water over her head. In the scene of the cow's burial, Naneh Khanoom again sprinkles water over the gathered crowd, saying, "A calamity has descended… may God Himself have mercy". In organizing the mourning ceremony for the cow, Naneh Khanoom and Naneh Fatemeh, along with the other women, assume a central role. A specific scene is devoted to their selection of the ceremonial standard (Alam) and the launching of the mourning procession. In the courtyard of Mashd Hassan's house, where the mourning ritual and rowzeh recitation for the cow take place, Naneh Khanoom sprinkles water over the weeping villagers. On the morning after the Boluris enter Mashd Hassan's cowshed, Naneh Khanoom and Naneh Fatemeh, accompanied by other women, go to the cowshed to perform prayers and healing rituals for Mashd Hassan, sprinkling water over him and the others. A noteworthy detail in this scene is that Naneh Fatemeh holds a bundle of wheat in her hands, while Naneh Khanoom sprinkles water over those present. In the cemetery scene, where women again have a prominent presence, these two women are once more seen together, moving one by one among the graves. They also appear together in the scene in which Mashd Hassan is taken to the city for treatment, visible from behind a window. Finally, Naneh Khanoom plays a central role in preparing the preliminaries for the wedding ceremony of Abbas's sister. In all these instances of co-presence, Naneh Khanoom occupies the primary position, while Naneh Fatemeh consistently accompanies her. Overall, the characteristics of Naneh Khanoom and Naneh Fatemeh, beyond their femininity, such as their constant pairing, their association with water (through repeated acts of sprinkling water), their weeping, their leadership in the mourning ritual for the cow, and their preparation of the wedding ceremony, all recall their connection with the two Amesha Spentas, Khordad and Amordad, particularly in relation to Anahita within Iranian mythology. In the material world, the guardianship of water is attributed to Khordad, while the protection of vegetation belongs to Amordad (Pourdavood, 1998, 95). Accordingly,

Naneh Khanoom and her cane may be interpreted as symbolic of a connection with water and the Amesha Spenta Khordad, whereas Naneh Fatemeh, who supports Naneh Khanoom in various scenes and holds a bundle of wheat, may be seen as representing the Amesha Spenta Amordad. Moreover, the repeated acts of water-sprinkling performed by these two women may themselves be associated with water and rain-seeking. According to a widespread belief, if one expects an action from nature, performing that action oneself is believed to encourage and compel nature to respond accordingly; thus, sprinkling water is considered a form of sympathetic magic intended to bring about rain (Bahar, 1998, 278). In addition, the black clothing, mourning practices, and expressions of grief displayed by Naneh Khanoom and Naneh Fatemeh in various situations, especially their central role alongside other women in the mourning ceremony for the cow, carry symbolic and mythological significance. Mourning and weeping function as symbols of rain-seeking: rainfall is believed to begin in response to the magic of human tears (Bahar, 1998, 272). Many scholars trace the origins of mourning rituals in Iran to the rites of lamentation for Siyavash, understood as a vegetation deity. From the moment of his death, mourning spreads throughout the city, with women leading the lamentation. It was believed that women, through their tears, generated the magic of water, prompting the water goddess to shed her tears once again, thereby bringing rain (Bahar, 1998, 266, 291). In the film "The Cow", the primary responsibility for conducting the mourning ceremony for the cow likewise falls upon Naneh Khanoom, Naneh Fatemeh, and the other women, a role that may be interpreted as closely connected to rituals of water, rain-seeking, and the invocation of fertility.

The Marriage of Abbas's Sister as a Symbol of Rain-seeking and Renewal

In the film "The Cow", Abbas's sister and Esmail are romantically involved, and several scenes are devoted to their relationship. In several shots, Abbas's sister is seen washing dishes beside the pool or cleaning wheat. The film's emphasis on wheat is significant insofar as it symbolizes growth, agriculture, and is regarded as the first crop cultivated by humans. Wheat neither grows nor ripens without rainfall (Aghaeirad, 2015, 33). In the final three minutes of the film, after Mashd Hassan falls from the top of the hill, a scene is shown in which Naneh Khanoom is preparing Abbas's sister for her wedding. Just as at the beginning of the film, Mashd Safar's son prepared Moosorkheh for a ritual by blackening his face with soot—a symbol of death—while the villagers looked on, here Naneh Khanoom adorns the bride and applies rouge to her face. This redness may be interpreted as a symbol of renewed life, standing in contrast to the black soot. In this scene as well, women stand beside Naneh Khanoom and the bride as observers, just as at the beginning of the film, children had surrounded Moosorkheh and Mashd Safar's son while the villagers watched. In the subsequent shot, a woman accompanied by three other women is shown playing the frame drum (dayereh). They move through the alleys and passageways and eventually enter the courtyard of Abbas's house. Upon their arrival, all the villagers express their joy. Notably, Mashd Safar's son and Moosorkheh, who at the beginning of the film had been engaged in scenes of violence, with Mashd Safar's son beating Moosorkheh with a stick or confronting him with a bow and arrows, are now cheerful and smiling, with their arms around each other's shoulders. Music, particularly instruments such as the dohol, sorna, and daf, plays a fundamental role in the performance of rain-seeking rituals. In many such ceremonies, the beating of the daf by women creates the conditions for dancing and celebration (Khazaie, 2015, 302). In addition to the scene of women playing the dayereh, at the beginning of the film, Mashd Eslam is shown playing music and singing, while the villagers gather around him and listen. His use of imagery related to water and wheat in his song is especially

significant in light of the hypothesis concerning the deliberate use of elements associated with water, fertility, and rain-seeking throughout the narrative. According to the screenplay, the villagers repeatedly ask Mashd Eslam to play music and sing (Saedi, n.d., 9), a detail that merits attention in relation to certain rain-seeking customs, such as the practice of appealing to wandering qalandars and asking them to play music and sing in order to invoke rain (Jafari (Qanavati), 2019). Overall, attention to the film's opening sequence, closely linked to a rain-seeking ritual, and its concluding sequence, which coincides with rainfall and the preparation for a wedding ceremony, underscores the thematic continuity of the film's scenes through the motif of water and rain. Moreover, in the authors' view, this ending of "The Cow", the falling of rain and the holding of a wedding ceremony, situated in continuity with the rain-seeking ritual at the beginning of the film and the mourning ceremony for the cow in its middle section, corresponds in a meaningful way to the conclusions of dragon-slaying myths, which are often marked by the onset of rain and a sacred marriage (Widengren, 1998, 71). It should also be noted that in Iranian folk culture, marriage and wedding ceremonies have been regarded as actions imbued with rain-invoking significance since ancient times (Khazaie, 2015, 199).

Conclusion

As noted earlier, the opposition between the two elements of water and aridity in Iran's land has historically been a matter of fundamental importance and has profoundly shaped Iranian attitudes toward the surrounding world. To such an extent, dualism and belief in the opposition of contraries have become the most essential principles of the worldview of the peoples of this land. The reflection of this outlook is evident in various manifestations of Iranian culture—myths, rituals, and epics alike—across both ancient and modern narratives. This thematic core has taken root in Iranian thought and belief as an archetype, such that by referring to cultural productions grounded in Iranian identity and authenticity, one may trace its presence, whether consciously or unconsciously. The film "The Cow", as a collaborative work by Gholamhossein Saedi and Dariush Mehrjui, may be regarded as one of the contemporary narratives of this archetype, formed on a fundamental principle of the Iranian worldview: the opposition of two antagonistic forces. In the film, this principle is manifested as the confrontation between the realms of the Bayalis and the Boluris, which constitutes its central thematic foundation. In the authors' view, the filmmakers' discernment lies in their use of mythological and ritual elements to articulate this core theme; elements that have historically constituted the basis of the Iranian worldview, characterized by binary opposition. In other words, "The Cow" employs myths and rituals associated with water, fertility, and rain-seeking in order to present, in epic form, the confrontation between the self and the other. Another notable feature is the film's holistic perspective and its purposeful, coherent deployment of these elements. They do not function as merely decorative or superficial motifs; rather, they are integrated into a structured framework with a clearly defined beginning and end. Moreover, the prominent presence of the element of water and its manifestations, especially rain, is so evident that it cannot be regarded as incidental or accidental. As demonstrated, the narrative of "The Cow" begins with a rain-seeking ritual in the sequence involving Moosorkheh, continues with the sacrifice of the cow and the accompanying ritual of mourning, which bears symbolic associations with water, fertility, and rain, and culminates in the death and sacrifice of Mashd Hassan, into whom the soul of the cow has entered, followed by rainfall and the celebration of a wedding ceremony as signs of renewal and regeneration. It should be noted that each of the three rituals discussed, while associated with the invocation of water, rain, and fertility, may also be understood, from another perspective, as indicating the dominance

of aridity, barrenness, calamity, affliction, grief, and illness over the village, conditions that the villagers attribute to the Boluris as the "other" and as destructive forces. Finally, the film's characters and their symbolic and mythological references may be summarized as follows: the Boluris symbolize the dragon of drought and the epic figure of Zahhak; Moosorkheh represents the kuseh figure in rain-seeking rituals; the cow/Mashd Hassan embodies the primordial cow of the creation myth and its epic counterpart, Siyavash; Naneh Khanoom and Naneh Fatemeh symbolize the two Amesha Spentas, Khordad and Amordad, as guardians of water and vegetation and as figures associated with the goddess Anahita (the deity of waters); and Abbas's sister and her wedding ceremony signify renewal, regeneration, and rain-seeking.

Author Contributions

This research is derived from the second author's postdoctoral dissertation in Art Research, entitled "A Comparative Study of the Co-Presence of the Character Hasan and the Cow in Iranian Literature and Folk Culture, with Emphasis on the Myth of the God Mithra", which is currently being conducted under the supervision of the first author at Alzahra University.

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Conflict of Interest

The author (s) declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest related to this research, in writing, and publication of this article

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Appendix

1. Aži Dahāka was said to originate from the land of Bowri / Bawri, which, in its transformation into the figure of Zahhak, also undergoes a nominal shift to Babylon (Safa, 1954, 452, 456; Hamidi, 2009). The reason for choosing the name Boluri in the film (rendered as Porousi in the screenplay and in The Mourners of Bayal) is not clear; however, its phonetic similarity to Bowri, identified as the land of Zahhak, is noteworthy.
2. Mahmoudi and Maheri (2024) argue that Zahhak, like many figures in Iranian mythology, undergoes transformation, and that Saedi draws upon this process of metamorphosis in the screenplay of "The Cow". This perspective can be regarded as consonant with the findings of the present study.

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