

Interpretation of Neo-Mythological Images and Mythological Motifs in the Novel *The Wise Sisyphus*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the interpretation of symbolic and mythological images such as Sisyphus, the boulder, and Aesop as neo-mythologemes created in Khurshid Dustmuhammad's novel The Wise Sisyphus. It also examines how the "motif of loneliness" reflected in the novel is artistically portrayed as the "eternal fate" of the Sisyphus neo-mythologeme.

Keywords: Neo-mythologeme, neo-mythological images, Sisyphus, Aesop, stone, "motif of loneliness."

INTRODUCTION

It is well known that the neo-mythologeme of "Sisyphus" and "The Rock of Sisyphus" is not new to world or Uzbek literature. This mythological image and mythological motif have existed for millennia, dating back to the period of ancient Greek literature. This raises a question: why is the issue of Sisyphus's fate still being addressed today? Why does a person of the twenty-first century bring back into written literature a neo-mythologeme and mythological motif that originated five or even ten centuries ago? This means that it is truly an immortal "mythological motif," "mythological image," and "mythological archetype." Humanity never ceases to examine itself by asking: Why am I living? What is the meaning of life? Who am I? Likewise, this theme does not disappear, because it is, in fact, a path toward those very questions.

What is Khurshid Dustmuhammad, one of the leading and active writers of today's literary process, seeking to convey through this novel and the neo-mythologeme of Sisyphus? What distinguishes the neo-mythologeme created by the writer from the Sisyphus of ancient Greek literature? This article attempts, at least in part, to provide answers to such questions.

Following the publication of the novel *The Wise Sisyphus*, it became the basis for the reflections, analyses, and interpretations of many literary scholars. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the novel sparked various debates in its time. As a result, two differing viewpoints emerged. While Y. Solijanov, M. Kuchkarova, and O. Eshniyazova gave the novel a positive assessment, N. Afakova, on the contrary, somewhat accuses the author of misinterpreting the image of Sisyphus:

As stated in the Wikipedia encyclopedia, over time 'the image of Sisyphus began to evoke sympathy and compassion among people... His sins were forgotten, and within the traditions of the Greek aristocracy, considering Sisyphus as one of their legendary ancestors became a matter of honor and glory. His severe punishment was no longer seen as a reward befitting his sins, but rather became a symbol of the gods' vengeance and vindictiveness.' Who knows – perhaps those nobles, subject to the rule of their base desires, turned the impious Sisyphus into a hero in order to justify their own grave sins in the eyes of the people?

"If this assumption is correct, then it would turn out that even our beloved writer did not properly understand the symbol. Alas..." Professor M. Kuchkarova, however, in her research comments on the genre classification of this work as follows:

In our view, Khurshid Dustmuhammad's *The Wise Sisyphus* is not a novel, but rather a philosophical essay. In the work being presented as a novel, there is neither novelistic thinking, nor a novelistic hero, nor a novelistic reality. The writer is completely breaking the literary canons of the 'novel' genre. However, if it is called a philosophical essay, the work justifies itself.

In Greek mythology, the neo-mythologeme of Sisyphus – known for his cunning, for outwitting the gods, and for being

condemned to push a boulder uphill only for it to roll back down again – has traveled across centuries and has been artistically interpreted by writers of various nations in world literature. “Among them are thinkers such as Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Critias; writers such as Sartre, Joyce, Kafka, Proust, Merle, Nikitin, and Camus; psychoanalysts such as Eric Berne; and painters such as Titian, in whose works this figure appears in various forms.”

The French writer Albert Camus, in his essay ‘The Myth of Sisyphus,’ interpreted “Sisyphus” and his “boulder” as the theoretical foundation of the philosophy of absurdism. Regarding this, the scholar N. Afakova expressed the following view:

The reality that attracted the attention of the French thinker was the fact that in various offices and institutions of social activity, people are occupied with tasks that bring not the slightest benefit. In her view, this pointless busyness is absurd, and realizing this is a tragedy. She metaphorically equates this endless and futile occupation with the ‘labor of Sisyphus,’ deprived of any true purpose.

A. Camus’ discovery that fascinated many is the thoughts that Sisyphus had while the stone was rolling down. The hero, although condemned, feels free and thinks, finding meaning even in eternal punishment! This is the rebellion, willpower, and freedom of Sisyphus that Camus discovered!”

After all, the question arises, why was Sisyphus punished? Naturally, the answer to this question is provided by Greek myths, that is, we can find information about this in the book *Myths and Legends of Ancient Greece* by N. A. Kun. According to legend, Sisyphus, the son of the sultan of the winds, was known for his selfishness, cunning, and cunning, and he was the ruler of the kingdom of Corinth. When the time came to take his soul, the god of death, Thanatos, skillfully bound him. As a result, no one died in the kingdom of Corinth, and the inhabitants did not even make sacrifices. As a result, Zeus, riding a horse of anger, sent the god of war, who freed Thanatos and took Sisyphus to the kingdom of spirits. Before that, Sisyphus had

ordered his wife Persephone not to bury his body or offer it to Hades, the god of the underworld. When no sign of sacrifice appeared, Sisyphus asked Hades for permission to return to the world of the living, claiming that he would instruct his wife accordingly and then immediately come back. However, once he returned, Sisyphus, proud of his cunning, once again indulged in worldly pleasures. Before long, Thanatos, the god of death, came once more and took his soul. As punishment for all his deceit on earth, the gods condemned him to push a gigantic boulder up a mountain, only for it to roll back down just as it reached the top. This is the brief summary of the legend presented in the work. The purpose of presenting this information is to reveal the protagonist's true character that is, to make the reader feel how severe a meaningless and fruitless punishment can be when imposed on a person distinguished by intelligence, cleverness, and deceit. Thus, according to the mythological interpretation, Sisyphus undoubtedly takes shape in our imagination as a negative character: a cruel figure renowned in his time for tyranny, arrogance, cunning, and unmatched deceitfulness. In ancient Greek myths and legends, the motifs of "Sisyphus" and his "punishment" by Zeus have different versions.

However, Khurshid Dustmuhammad reveals the pure heart hidden beneath the darkness with which others perceive Sisyphus, much like breaking apart a rough and hard shell to uncover a pearl within. He shows the other side of the coin and encourages the reader to view the character from a different perspective. Professor M. Kuchkarova offers the following interpretation of the image created by the writer: "In our view, Kh. Dustmuhammad attributes intelligence and wisdom to the character of Sisyphus he has created as signs of humanity. Crushed under the burden of the arduous labor of pushing the boulder to the summit, Kh. Dustmuhammad's Sisyphus, much like Uzbek men, curses the stone intensely, using every insult in his vocabulary. Yet gradually, these curses transform into terms of endearment. He begins to stroke and caress the stone, embracing it like a beloved companion, or like a cat or dog affectionately leaning against its owner. In short, through intellect and wisdom, Sisyphus finds a way to the heart of the

stone. In the symbol of Sisyphus created by Kh. Dustmuhammad, we see the image of an intelligent and wise human being. In today's global world, which has become an arena of competing ideas, the artistic-philosophical message at the heart of this essay is that a human being can survive and achieve his goals only through intellect and resourcefulness."

In literature, the expressions "Sisyphean labor" and "the stone of Sisyphus" often symbolize arduous work and suffering. According to the legend, the very attempt to push the stone to the summit is itself meaningless. The writer takes precisely this situation as the foundation of the work, seeking to find meaning in Sisyphus's seemingly absurd act of rolling the stone. As the protagonist Sisyphus repeatedly pushes the fallen stone back toward the summit, he gradually discovers and comprehends the essence of life, coming to understand the power of human humanity. In this way, he transforms from an ordinary Sisyphus into the Wise Sisyphus. "If speech was but the shadow of the passing present, then silence, in his view, became the symbol of eternity and immortality. It was as though, whenever he spoke, he was conversing with the present, but when he remained silent, he was entering into dialogue with eternity itself." These reflections show that Khurshid Dustmuhammad's portrayal of Sisyphus differs from earlier interpretations of the figure. In particular, Homer, the earliest epic poet of ancient Greek literature, depicted Sisyphus as characterized by cunning and hypocrisy. In other words, Homer's interpretation created the image of "Cunning Sisyphus."

One of the major representatives of twentieth-century modernist literature, Albert Camus – the founder of absurd literature and the theory of the absurd – artistically portrays the neo-mythologeme of Sisyphus as a "rebel hero." In the artistic interpretation of the Uzbek writer Khurshid Dustmuhammad, however, Sisyphus transforms into the image of a "wise man." We classify the distinctive characteristics of the Sisyphus neo-mythologeme in Kh. Dustmuhammad's interpretation as follows:

1. not fearing hardships, and building the city of Corinth while enriching the nation's treasury;

2. saving people from the plague of death and bringing them joy;
3. putting an end to wastefulness;
4. resolving any difficulty wisely through the power of thought and the counsel of trusted close companions;
5. striving toward goodness and light;
6. determination, intelligence, and strong willpower.

These very qualities once again prove that Sisyphus is indeed wise. The following remarks by Professor M. Kuchqorova further complement the points mentioned above:

The new neo-mythologeme of Sisyphus created by Khurshid Dustmuhammad differs from the Sisyphus figures portrayed before him in that, through immense strength of will and hard labor in the face of suffering, he frees himself from his sins and his state of condemnation. In our view, it is precisely this innovation that renews Kh. Dustmuhammad's neo-mythological image of Sisyphus.

The "motif of loneliness," which is intrinsic to Sisyphus's inner world in the novel, also deserves separate scholarly attention. Before dwelling on this, let us review the scientific and theoretical views concerning the concept of motif. The concept of motif was first introduced into scholarship by one of the Russian scholars, Aleksandr Nikolayevich Veselovsky. In his book *Poetics of Plot*, he states: "By motif, I mean a formula that serves as an imaginative response to the simplest question about what something is, representing a significant or recurring vivid impression of reality." Another major contributor to motif theory, Olga Freidenberg, in her article and monograph *Poetics of Plot and Genre* (1925), advanced the idea that the motif is the figurative interpretation of the plot. In Uzbek literary studies as well, a number of views exist regarding the concept of motif. In particular, the literary scholar Dilmurod Kuranov, in his book *Theory of Literature* defines motif as follows:

A motif (motif image) is an image that has acquired a certain stability in both form and content, and through its recurrence in the

works of one or several authors, reveals their creative aspirations. For example, the image of the 'road' may be considered a motif in the works of Chulpan. This very image frequently recurs in both his poetry and prose. Likewise, motifs characteristic of Chulpan's creativity such as the 'star' and the 'traveler' can also be found in the poetry of the 1920s-30s, particularly in the works of A. Fitrat, Aybek, and U. Nasir.

The "motif of loneliness" can be considered a multifaceted concept. Its causes, forms of manifestation, psychological states, and external factors vary greatly. Therefore, in philosophy, it is studied as a concept; in psychology, as a psychological state; in medicine, as a disorder; and in Sufi teachings, as a means of attaining perfection and closeness to God. Through the above perspectives, we may examine the various dimensions of meaning embedded in Sisyphus's loneliness:

The first is trial – educating and transforming a person through isolation and various forms of ritual experience. Perhaps the gods intended to discipline Sisyphus in this very way, giving him the opportunity to examine his own flaws. For it is only when a person is left alone with oneself that one reveals what lies within, separating what is genuine from what is empty, what is valuable from what is worthless;

The second is enforced isolation – banishment from one's tribe or society, or confinement through imprisonment. From another perspective, Sisyphus is a figure punished for his deeds, his rebellion, and his possession of forbidden knowledge. In the novel created by our writer, there is another "secret" that provokes Zeus's wrath against Sisyphus. Indeed, awareness of the truth has always posed a threat both to oppressive societies and to those in power. Likewise, Sisyphus is interpreted as a figure who is aware of two secrets:

1. He is aware of the wrongdoing of the supreme god Zeus – namely, the abduction of Aegina, the daughter of Asopus, the ruler of waters and seas.
2. He is also aware of the secret carefully concealed from the common people regarding Zeus's lineage and his patricidal nature: after it was foretold that Zeus's father would be

destroyed by his own child, his wife Rhea began to hand over the children she bore, whom he devoured. However, in place of her last child – Zeus – Rhea gave him a stone wrapped in cloth. When Zeus grew up, he avenged his siblings by overthrowing his father. This inherited legacy of bloodshed marks Zeus as both a child-devourer and a patricidal figure.

The novel presents precisely this same reason: “Sisyphus’s only real ‘crime’ was his awareness... In the eyes of the gods, there is no creature more dangerous than one who knows... The true danger of the world lies in the informed!” So, for the gods, Sisyphus is a dangerous person, and therefore, toiling in solitude with a lifeless rock to no avail is the most appropriate punishment.

The third is voluntary solitude – dervish-like withdrawal. The punishment imposed upon Sisyphus by the gods gradually turned into familiarity, and that familiarity in turn became habit. Yet, although this punishment was not voluntary, Sisyphus gradually adapted himself to this condition.

However, Sisyphus – possessed of great willpower, courage, and endurance – though he submits to the punishment of fate, remains distressed that the gods have also condemned him to loneliness. Solitude fills him with fear. This suggests that the feeling of eternal loneliness is alien to human nature itself. He is left entirely alone in time and space, with neither possibility, nor means, nor even hope of escape. This becomes a punishment even harsher than rolling the enormous boulder up the mountain. “Sisyphus’s ears became deafened. Before his eyes, shadows, silhouettes, and clouds blended into one chaotic mass... The pitch-black and suffocating silence was slowly drawing him into its depths – it had begun to swallow him from the head downward! He felt as though he were descending through the narrow throat of some long-necked creature. Constriction, darkness, and silence – Sisyphus could never have imagined that stillness could become so terrifying, so horrifying that it would plant dread in his very heart! What should he do now? Should he shout? Should he scream? Should he cry out? Who would hear his lament? Who?!” Here is a spiritual portrait of loneliness and

the lonely person in the novel. Perhaps Sisyphus also sees rolling the boulder to the top as a solution to loneliness. In order to get rid of it, he is afraid of realizing his loneliness, so he does not get tired of trying to roll the boulder to the top. That is why he does not get tired of the fact that the boulder rolls down again.

As a result of our study, we have classified the neo-mythologemes and mythological motifs created in Khurshid Dustmuhammad's novel *The Wise Sisyphus* as follows:

Classification of neo-mythological images	Classification of mythological motifs
The Neomythology of Sisyphus	"The motif of loneliness"
The neomythology of Kharsangtash	"The motif of rolling the boulder up the mountain"
Mythological image of Asopus	"The motive of sin"
Mythological image of Zeus	"The Motive of Being Free from Sin"
Mountain neomythology	"The motive for remaining a witness"
Sea mythology	"Punishment Motive"

Through the wisdom embedded in Khurshid Dustmuhammad's novel *The Wise Sisyphus*, the reader is encouraged to re-examine life, society, and one's own "Sisyphus." At the same time, the work presents a number of symbolic details whose meanings the reader seeks together with the protagonist, striving to reach the "summit."

In conclusion, based on the reflections above, it can be said that Khurshid Dustmuhammad effectively makes use of the motif of the "legends about Sisyphus," which has existed in ancient Greek mythology in multiple versions and variations, and reinterprets it by rediscovering the neo-mythologemes of "Sisyphus," "the Boulder," "the Mountain," and "Asopus," along with the motifs gathered around them: the "motif of loneliness," the "motif of rolling the boulder up the mountain," the "motif of sinfulness," the "motif of liberation from sin," and the "motif of becoming a witness."

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