

Sneezing: A Mythological Image of Reproduction

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

Reading the works of some Persian poets and writers such as Khaqani, Nezami, Beihaqi, etc. we face a rare usage of the word "sneezing" (عطسه) in a particular sense which is related to the concepts of reproduction and father son relationship. In the explanatory notes on these works there is no comprehensive explanation elaborating on the reason for the poet or the writer's usage of the word "sneezing" in this sense. Most of the scholars referred to some Islamic myths but none of the myths make the relationship between sneezing and reproduction clear enough.

The fact that the word is used in the same sense in English and French idioms and expressions (both comparing a child who looks exactly like his father to the father's spit), raises the question as to whether there is any ancient myth which can be considered as the origin of this particular usage of "sneezing" in different languages? According to the studies of Horn (2004) and Gadalla (2018), who traced respectively the origin of the English and French idioms, the relationship between Sneezing and reproduction has its roots in an ancient Egyptian myth. The goal of this study is to show how the ancient myth has transformed to appear as a metaphor in Persian literature.

2. Theoretical Framework

As Horn (2004), Gadalla (2018) and Frayer (2013) showed separately in their studies, the relationship between sneezing and fertility can be traced in different languages and cultures. Horn (2004) showed its examples in Italian, German, Portuguese, Greek, etc. He believed that it had originated from an ancient Egyptian myth according to which the God "Shu" begot his heir by sneezing and that is why his son was called "Tefnut" meaning "sneeze". The

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results of Gadalla's studies on the origin of the French expression corroborates this assumption.

Fraye (2013) explained that saliva played a significant role in many ancient myths depicting the scene of the very first creation. As he put it in his article, saliva, just like dust and clay, was an essential component of the creation. In this respect, breath, spit as well as sneeze are three main images of creation and reproduction in myths since all the three contain saliva.

In each language and culture, one of these three images dominated the other two. In ancient Greece, sneezing was considered sacred and divine. Aristotle believed that sneezing is related to soul as it comes out from head where soul is located in. Some African, American, Asian, and European superstitions stemmed from the belief that there is a relationship between sneezing and soul too. In Christian culture, the image of spitting was repeated in myths and the stories of the wonderworks of Jesus. In Islamic culture, although breath is the dominant image in creation scenes since according to The Holy Quran, God breathed out his soul to give life to Adam sneezing is considered sacred as well. It is believed that Adam sneezed following God's breath. It is also believed that cat was born when lion sneezed in Noah's ark, so there is a hint of relationship between sneeze, soul and creation/reproduction in Islamic culture, too. This relationship is highlighted particularly in Khagani's odes in 12th century. He repeatedly used "sneeze" as a metaphor for "child", "outcome" or "consequence" in his works.

3. Method

In this study, it was tried to find what the Persian metaphors using the image of "sneezing" to indicate "reproduction" have in common with the other idioms and expressions using the related images in the same way in other languages. Horn (2004) and Gadalla's (2018) studies had already brought it in light that such images have the same origin. Frayer showed also how the original metaphor showing parent's saliva as the resource of reproductive power has ramified into three main metaphors (sneeze, breath, spit) in different cultures and literatures. Since the images used in Islamic culture and literature were ignored in the previous studies, examples from both Persian and Arabic texts were analyzed to find out to which branch they belong. They then were compared with those belonging to other branches.

4. Results

According to an ancient Egyptian myth, saliva is related to fertility. As breath, spit and sneeze, all contain saliva, they were used as the metaphors of "reproduction" in different cultures and some French, English, Italian,

German, Portuguese, Greek expressions reflect the relationship between these three images and fertility. Having analyzed the images related to the metaphor cited above in Islamic culture, we concluded that such relationship between the word "breath"/"sneeze" and reproduction exists in the latter culture, too.

5. Conclusion

In Islamic culture and Persian literature, the absolute dominant image among "breath", "spit" and "sneeze" (the three images related to fertility in different languages) is "breath". Evidently, the dominance of this image in Islamic literature is the natural corollary of the use of this image in the creation scene described by The Holy Quran, The image of "sneeze" also appears in some Islamic myths and Persian verses, specially in Khaqani's odes, to indicate "reproduction".

Keywords: sneeze, creation, soul, myth, spittle, breathing, fertility

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