FAIRY WOMEN IN BUSHEHRI FOLKLORE

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Introduction

In folklores, there are many stories and narratives which give life to the legendary fairy and make her an inseparable part of everyday life. The term Parig (which means fairy) has been mentioned in Zoroastrian texts as one of Ahriman’s allies. Accordingly, researchers presume that due to a change in religious attitudes, Fairy, the goddess of fertility in pre-Zoroastrian period, has recreated her status in Zoroastrian mythology as a negative figure. However, what is astonishing is the trace of Fairy in views and beliefs of common people, those who still think favorably of this ancient goddess. Fairy is a mysterious figure and therefore cannot be judged as totally good or bad. She is a beautiful woman and like Anahiti brings fertility; she is, on the other hand an enticing woman and like "Jahi" has sworn to delude men. In short, Fairy's contradictory nature of being both good and bad and her eternal presence in the believers' minds indicate the importance and status of this ancient goddess.

Fairy is more popular in the coastal regions of the Persian Gulf than the other parts of Iran. If fairy is associated with qanats (tunnels dug to carry water) and springs in central Iran, she introduces herself as “mermaid” in the regions near the Persian Gulf. What is notable in Bushehri folklore is their firm belief in the real presence of various fairies in their everyday life.

The present essay studies different types of fairies in Bushehri folklore and by classification of them it examines their differences and similarities. It will also deal briefly with the concept of fairy in Iranian culture.

For Bushehri people, fairy is not a mere figment of imagination; many men and women have seen her face-to-face or have benefited greatly from her directly or indirectly. Still some people leave food on plates for fairies and believe that after an hour, they will eat it and bring the plate back clean. Fairy is alive and active in the culture of the Southern Iran. It is not a simplistic point of view at all. On the contrary, the complex intellectual system of the Southerners has made fairy different from the fairy of other parts of Iran which has a direct relationship with the structure of their socio-economic lifestyle.

In the Southern Iran and especially among Bushehri people, fairies are classified into two general groups: the sea fairies and the desert fairies. In their opinion, water and land have their own especial inhabitants. Therefore, they call mysterious beings of the sea "the inhabitants of the see". These inhabitants are weird and complex creatures; sometimes they get tangled in fishing nets and sometimes they assume human form. Some of them are tall with black face wearing chain around their feet and walk on all fours. At nights, they walk around beach huts and as soon as they see human beings they return to the sea (Ravanipoor, 13, 1369).

In Bushehr, the inhabitants of the sea or let's say mermaids are known as "Abiha ". We will mention, in detail, the characteristics of these dreamlike women in the next section. However, the interesting point is that although some other creatures act like mermaids, they are not classified under the label of "Abiha ". For instance, "Om ol-Madas" whom Gholamhosin Saedi alludes to in The Inhabitants of the Air is one of these creatures. In Ravanipoor's works and in stories narrated by Zargholum the fisher, there are instances of mermaids that are not classified as Abiha and are regarded as the common inhabitants of the sea.

The counterparts of Abiha are the desert fairies. The people of Bushehr call them "Ahle Una" or "Ahle
Ushun". Certainly, the fact that they are not called by name indicates how much the desert fairies are taboos. However, on closer examination one can realize that some Ahle Una are not fairy at all and they should be classified under the label of jinni and that it is not correct to call them fairy just because they are female.

Theoretically speaking, fairy has an obvious relationship with water and fertility that can be regarded as her distinguishing feature. In this study, the term fairy-like is used to imply a common mistake which recurs frequently in folklore studies when non-fairies are considered as fairies or when some groups of fairies are not considered fairy just because they are not called so.

Fairies of the sea and desert

The two different groups of fairy in Bushehri folklore indicate the logical relationship between geographical region and mental representations of these people. The desert fairy is like fairies of other parts of Iran in terms of physical appearance. Likewise, the sea fairy has many features in common with Greek and Mesopotamian fairies. In this section, we introduce these two groups of fairies in detail.

The desert fairy is a tall and beautiful woman who dresses in red and her blonde hair are hanging over her shoulders. Her unique beauty makes men infatuated with her. This beautiful woman usually dwells on the river bank or brook or at least can be seen there. "Man Mandas" is probably one of these desert fairies. She has saw-like tights and wanders in the deserts and mountain holding a jewelry box in her hands. Men become infatuated with her upon seeing her and follow her in the hope that they can attain her but instead, Man Mandas takes their life in ruins. However, if one recognizes her and be aware of her wiles, that he should throw a feast of earth on Man Mandas's face to get the jewelry box (Saedi; 106).

Despite the popular belief that there is an unbreakable relationship between fairy and the sea in Iranian mythology, there are few references to this kind of fairies in the canonical literature. The name of fairies who come from the sea and fight against the holy fire of "Azar Barzin" has been mentioned just once in the excerpts of Zad Esperm (Sarkarati, 17; 1385).

The sea fairy has also a beautiful and mesmerizing face. She lives in the sea and usually appears to fishermen. She is with the head and upper body of a human being and the tail and lower body of a fish. She has short hands and long hair; whole her body is light blue like that of the sea. In Bushehri folklore, Abih'a's beauties exceed the desert feries'. Sometimes the sea fairies pluck up their courage to come to the coast and before anyone comes near they come back to the sea. Fishermen tell many stories about mermaids and their enticements. However, the worst moment is when a fairy falls in love with a man of the sea. Abiah never abandon their attempt to sleep with man which costs man's life.

It is probable that Sumerians had transmitted their fairy lore to Iranian via the Persian Gulf (Garry, 8; 1378). In Sumerian mythology, fairy comes from the sea like a kind goddess and teaches various sciences and arts to people.

In Bushehri folklore both groups of fairies are depicted as beautiful and alluring women. In the Avesta, the enticing feature of a fairy called Xanatheiti who allured Garshāsb is emphasized (Amuzgar, 18; 1371). Is her beauty a fleeting feature that will perish after deluding the hero? Does the beautiful and young fairy, like witches, turn into an ugly and old one? In Bushehri folklore, it is not mentioned. Bushehri folklore shows fairies assuming animal form and as they leave their animal form, their stunning beauty bewitches men. In fact, it seems that fairies' beauty is real and permanent and even forms a part of their sexual identity. This aspect of their identity is very important because with the help of their beauty they can play one of their best roles, that is, marrying men.

Fairy; Ahura or Ahriman

The fairies of the sea and desert are both mysterious and ambiguous. As if there are two groups of fairies in relation to humans: helpful and kindly; mischievous and dangerous. Saedi also divides fairies into two kinds: pagans and believers. Though the pagans are more dangerous, both kinds can harm man (Saedi, 50; 1355). For Bushehri people, the sea fairies are more demonic than the desert ones. The desert fairies have a better relationship with humans. Everyone who can bring the desert fairies under his or her control can carry her hair even after her release. The hair, as far as no one sees it, gives the person a magical power to cure diseases. This power is called "bahre" and the person who possesses this power is called Bahredar (Sharifian; 20, 1381). Bahredar is able to cure maladies, especially those of
children including jaundice. However, all problems can be solved by it. For example, a story goes that some Sa'dan could defeat a witch due to his relationship with fairies and jinnees (Ravanipoor, 21-22; 1369).

The desert fairies such as Man Mandas could be mischievous but their population is not considerable. This group of fairies stands on the roads and solitary places and like jinnees fear from iron and other metals. These jinnees may be female and in the folklore, they are usually regarded by mistake as fairies. In yahshs, or hymns, of the Avesta, the sacred book of Zoroastrianism, fairy is also considered as female demon and Ahriman's appointee (Yahaghi;141,1375).

However, encountering the sea fairy is a story of sad ending. It happens sometimes that a member of Abiha falls in love with a fisherman and in order to get him, first kills him, and then brings him to underwater or fairyland. Then she gives him life and finally marries him. This description of the sea fairy makes her distinctive from the desert one. Usually the desert fairy becomes the object of desire and if a man can bring her under the control, she endows him with magical power. Sometimes she gives the power under the condition that the man sets her free.

In a story about the sea fairy her kindly aspect is shown. A pearl diver goes underwater. There, he sees a beautiful woman with a baby on her laps. She wants him to bring her a cradle. The diver, without any words, leaves her and the next time when he goes underwater brings a cradle for her. As a reward, the fairy gives him precious pearls (69).

In canonical literature, fairy is exclusively depicted as a negative figure. In one of these manuscripts, there is a dialogue between Solomon and a fairy. Solomon asks her: "where do you live?" She answers "in Tabarestan", that is, the land of demons in Iranian mythology. Solomon asks her to explain how she harms women. She explains how she does it based on women's date of birth and then offers the solution for it, which is in the form of a prayer. In a section of this book, fairy says "if someone passes me not mentioning the name of God, his bones will ache" (Dive-nâmeh, 20-35). In fact, the word to pass a fairy is the remembrance of God and in this way one can overcome her. The question is, therefore, how fairies can be classified as good beings? And how come fairies appear in folklore as helpful heroes? Though she entice people, fairy gives her lover eternal blessing then.

The marriage of human and fairy

The marriage of human and fairy is considered as a common happening in Bushehri folklore. The fairies of the sea and desert both can marry humans. Though the sea fairy's marriage leads to the man's death, it can results in a child that would live underwater forever. On the other hand, the child of the desert fairy lives among humans and in terms of physical appearance is not different from other children of his or her father. But the child of the sea fairy and humans takes the mother's characteristics and has no opportunity to live among humans.

Childbearing is in line with the mythological nature of fairy; "the concept of fertility and bounty is immanent and inhering in the mythological nature of fairies" (Mazdapoor, 13; 291). This concept has roots in the belief in the ancient goddess which was admirable and adorable in the pre-Zoroastrian era.

Among ordinary people there are many stories about Faez Dashti, a poet famous for his couplets. In these stories his acquaintance with fairies are told differently. However, the important issue is his marriage with a desert fairy. Some believe that Faez has a child of this marriage. The relationship of Faez and the fairy is unbroken until people know it. Then, the fairy abandons Faez who love her vigorously. The fruit of this love is his beautiful poems. Certainly, this story is not important in terms of history or truth. Howevere, from an anthropological view, it shows the great ability of the poet in a way that people cannot attribute it to the inborn ability of him and therefore, try to find its source in a supernatural being.

The marriage of human and fairy is reminiscent of the sacred marriage; the gender contrast between two beings of different nature, one of human and the other of gods's realm and supernatural powers. Thanks to the marriage with the desert fairy one is bestowed with power. The shamans also get parts of their power through marriage with their supernatural wives (Eliade, 149; 1388). In this kind of marriage, what is more important is the shamans' apprenticeship and learning from the holy spirits. However, Eliade mentions an instance of the marriage between man and fairies in which the fairy kills her child and abandons Marco Kralievic (Eliade, 54; 1378).
In folklor literature, fairies never stay with humans forever. Some time, fairies escape humans’ traps by hook or crook. Or their relationship is broken when men reveal their secrets and break their promise. As a result, an unusual event happens. The players take some parts of the time Man becomes one with fairy, the supernatural being. Returning to the real time, a tiny portion of fairy’s power is given to man. In fact, fairy is a part of metaphysical world which for a moment is revealed onto man and the result of this revelation is the power given to the man from the supernatural world.

Argument and conclusion

Fairy is the symbol of what a deprived man always long for: money, beauty, fertility, and miracle. Fairy is a part of the desires of a nation that try to fulfill them in the metaphysical world. This world is out of man's control. It goes beyond the realm of logic and therefore, one can find what he or she longs for that cannot find in the real world. This issue makes the concept of fairy more and more mysterious to a degree that when man's relationship with a fairy is revealed, his connection to the metaphysical world is terminated. What does make this relationship mysterious? Is it just the metaphysical element in folklore that accounts for concealing the relationship? It seems that the eccentricity of the relationship justifies its mysterious condition. In fact, fairy is a supernatural being that functions as a bridge between man and his wishes. Bahman Sarkati, in his analysis of fairy, considers her as a symbol of unconsciousness that through a marriage, one can bring it into his consciousness. While this mythical imagination about the fairies of the sea and desert may be acceptable, however, it cannot be a good reason for hope and despair fishermen have toward the sea and mermaids. Perhaps, the belief in the sea fairies has been as a result of interaction of foreign mariners with Iranian because such beliefs cannot be found in other parts of Iran especially in the regions near the Caspian Sea and Lake Urmia. Even Nima's legend of Manli has been written based on a Japanese legend. It seems that the sea fairy, as an imported idea, has been accepted with fear and ambiguity and consequently, its harmful aspect has been more emphasized. In similar cases, we see such an attitude toward some probably real creatures like Siah-Balaye-Zanjir-be-Pa. Is it not correct to say that such narratives have been inspired by seeing some slave who has escaped his ship and in order to obtain food walks around beach huts and as soon as he sees a man returns to the sea or his ship? Maybe we can follow the subject with a close reading of ethnic memory and collective fate of Bushehri people.

As it was mentioned at the beginning of the essay, sometimes the word fairy is used interchangeably with other imaginary and legendary beings. Sometimes on the other hand, a being which is fairy by nature and function is not regarded fairy because she is not called so and has a different name rather than fairy. In other words, some imaginary beings are considered as fairy while they are not so; they are fairy-like but have not the essential characteristics of fairies. The main characteristics of Iranian fairies are their relationship with water, fertility and bounty. Considering these eternal features and her membership in the army of Ahriman in Zoroastrian mythology persuade some researchers to regard fairy as the goddess of fertility in pre-Zoroastrian era. Generally speaking, there are only two clear attitudes towards fairy: the first one is Zoroastrian texts that show obvious enmity toward her and the second one is folklore that have a positive attitude to her. In fact, what makes folklore distinct from Zoroastrian texts is that there is no good and bad dichotomy in the folklore. Despite their fear from fairy, the people of Busheh consider her as the source of goodness. In Zoroastrian worldview, there are clear dichotomies in the relationship between creatures. Ahura Mazda and his allies fight against Ahriman and his horde of demons. This opposition between them defines the line between good and evil. There is not such a dichotomy about fairies because as much as people try to avoid them, they are also eager to see them. Has the folklore chosen the middle-way between Ahura and Ahriman? Or has the collective intellect been intact from the biases of the canonical texts? We don’t know about the history of attitudes and thinking about fairies but in our modern era believing in fairies is certainly a kind of looking at the sky just to forget the earthly lacks and needs.

Works cited

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