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A Critical Study of the Myth of Memory and Forgetfulness in Contemporary Poetry: A Case Study of Ahmad Shamlu's Poems

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Abstract

One of the types of myths, alongside those of creation, resurrection, salvation, rebirth, renewal, and the savior, is the myth of memory and forgetfulness, which has also featured prominently in Iranian mystical allegorical tales. This myth has Indian and Greek foundations and has manifested in poetry that is deeply intertwined with mythology. Mircea Eliade has referred to this myth, and Ahmad Shamlu, as one of the contemporary Persian poets, repeatedly evokes it throughout his collected works. The purpose of this research is to analyze the myth of memory and forgetting in contemporary poetry. For this purpose, using a library-based and descriptive methodology, we examine instances of the emergence and manifestation of this myth in Shamlu's poetry. The results indicate that, in Shamlu's work, the myth of memory and forgetfulness is interwoven with the myth of the Fall. In some instances, the Anima archetype evokes this myth. In others, this myth is linked to the concept of 'Alam al-Dharr' (the World of Particles or the Primordial Covenant) in Islamic and mystical thought, representing the anguish and sorrow resulting from a mystical separation from the Divine Truth. In some cases, it intentionally or unintentionally recalls Indian and Gnostic narratives and shares similarities with the concept of reincarnation in Hindu thought.

Keywords: Myth, Memory and Forgetfulness, Religions, Contemporary Poetry, Ahmad Shamlu.

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1. Introduction

According to Barthes, myth is a form of discourse; according to Saint Augustine, it is something beyond human explanation; and in Mircea Eliade's view, it expresses beginnings and represents a kind of sacred history (see Barthes, 2007, p. 30; Esmaeilpour, 2012, p. 13; Eliade, 2012, p. 18). Myth has been categorized in various ways and encompasses different types, such as creation myths, resurrection myths, salvation myths, myths of memory and forgetfulness, and myths of rebirth and renewal, among others. One of the most significant myths throughout human history is the myth of memory and forgetfulness. Eliade, the renowned mythologist and scholar of religions, has referred to this myth and examined it across different cultures. Based on his views, this myth has deep roots among Hindu peoples and the Greeks. Even among primitive farmers and in folk narratives, traces of this myth can be found, often imbued with psychological and metaphysical dimensions. In these narratives, forgetfulness is regarded as a kind of death and an obstacle to immortality, whereas remembrance evokes immortality itself.

It appears that this myth first emerged in Gnostic belief (see *Britannica*, 1991, p. 718), where the Gnostic mystic must strive to avoid forgetfulness. At the same time, the mystic must undergo the trial of falling into forgetfulness and then emerge from it successfully in order to attain knowledge and enlightenment (see Esmaeilpour, 2011, p. 306). In Gnostic thought, "remembrance is the foundation of life and creativity, whereas forgetfulness of the origin and source is considered a descent into darkness and death" (Esmaeilpour, 2012, p. 70).

A famous Gnostic story recorded in The Pearl narrates that a prince comes from the East to Egypt in search of "the incomparable pearl located in the midst of a sea, around which a hissing snake has coiled." In Egypt, he falls into the captivity of the men of that land, who feed him their food, causing the prince to forget his identity and origin. However, his father and mother, knowing what had happened to him, write him a letter. The letter flies like an eagle, descends upon him, and transforms into speech (it begins to speak). The prince reads the letter and remembers that his parents are kings. He recalls the pearl for which he had been sent to Egypt, enchants the hissing snake, obtains the pearl, and returns. The role of food in this story, which causes the prince's forgetfulness, is similar to its function in the story of Zahhak, where it leads him to wrongdoing and estranges him from his human identity.

In Hindu thought, the entry of the soul into the body is accompanied by a kind of forgetfulness, and worldly desires act as obstacles to recalling the soul's true abode.

In the famous story of Matsyendranath and Gorakhnath, when Matsyendranath was in Ceylon, he fell in love with the queen and completely forgot his true identity. He remained in her palace, yielded to every temptation, and succumbed to his desires and passions. Thus, he became a captive of the women.

Upon hearing of Matsyendranath's captivity, Gorakhnath consulted the book of fates and destinies and sought to rescue his master.

> Then, in the guise of a dancing woman, he presented himself before Matsyendranath in the Kadali, and while singing ironic songs, he began to dance. Gradually, Matsyendranath recalled his lineage and true identity: he realized that 'the path of lust and bodily pleasure' leads to death, and that his 'forgetfulness' was indeed the forgetting of his true and eternal nature, thereby regaining his identity (Eliade, 2013, p. 120).

In Buddhism, there are gods who, when their memory becomes disturbed or confused, fall from heaven to earth and take on human form. Some of them engage in austerity, meditation, and reflection, and through the discipline of yoga, succeed in recalling their previous lives.

In Greek mythology, forgetfulness is equated with death, and the spring of Lethe is considered part of the realm of death. The underworld gods and the brothers of Forgetfulness dwell there, and the spirit of Lethe symbolizes oblivion. It is believed that poets receive inspiration from the Muses to access truths—particularly those related to primordial events and the first creation (see Eliade, 2012, p. 152). In Greece, Plato's world of Forms is in some ways analogous to the *ʿĀlam al-Dharr* in Islamic narratives, where the soul can recall what it has once seen and forgotten. For the Greeks, as well as for Jews and Christians, sleep is equated with death. Interestingly, among Muslims, it is also believed that sleep is the brother of death. In Zoroastrianism, pouring leftover wine onto the ground evokes the myth of memory and forgetfulness, illustrating the significance of this myth across various religions and philosophical traditions. Awakening from sleep through reminders and recollections of the past is a recurrent motif in many allegorical stories. The importance of this awakening and night vigil is particularly evident in mysticism. In one of the earliest myths, Gilgamesh must remain awake for six days to attain immortality. In Christianity, Jesus repeatedly instructs his disciples to stay awake (Matthew 24:42, *New International Version*)

In Avicenna's allegorical and mystical tales—including *Salaman and Absal*, *Qasida-ye ʿAyniya*, *Risalat al-Tayr*, and *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*—as well as in Suhrawardi's narratives such as *The Red Intellect* and *Qissa-ye Gharbah al-Gharbiya*, this myth is employed. Sheikh Attar in *Sheikh San'an* and Rumi in *The Prince Deceived by a Sorcerer* also draw upon this myth.

According to Islamic narratives, the origins of these stories trace back to verses in the Qur'an, their interpretations, and the belief in a realm known as the "World of the Particles" (*ʿĀlam al-Dharr*). The World of the Particles—also referred to as *ʿĀlam al-Alasṭ* or *ʿĀlam Qālū Balā*—is one of the realms of creation mentioned in the Qur'an and hadiths. According to Islamic scholars, this realm either precedes or coincides with the creation of Adam. In the World of the Particles, all human beings destined to be born until the Day of Judgment appeared as "particles," or, in some narrations, in the form of ants.

More than ten Qur'anic verses are believed by commentators to refer to this realm, including Surah *Al-A'rāf* (7:172), *At-Taghābun* (64:2), *Yūnus* (10:74), *An-Najm* (53:56), *Al-An'ām* (6:110), *Ar-Ra'd* (13:20), and *Al-Hajj* (22:5), among others. Two of these verses are cited here. In *Surah Al-A'rāf*, God Almighty says:

> And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam—from their loins—their descendants and made them testify concerning themselves, [saying to them], 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yes, we testify,' lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, 'Indeed, we were of this unaware.' (Qur'an 7:172).

All commentators agree that this verse refers to the World of the Particles. However, some also cite another verse in connection with it: "Did I not enjoin upon you, O children of Adam, not to worship Satan?" (Qur'an 36:60). The conclusion drawn from these two verses is the establishment of a covenant between the Creator and humankind, to which both verses allude. Whether this covenant actually existed or should be understood as a symbolic metaphor remains a matter of interpretation.

Various commentaries offer different explanations. Some narrations describe a spiritual perception granted to the servants in the World of the Particles, through which they could recognize their Creator and Provider (ʿAyāshī, [Gregorian Year Equivalent], pp. 39–40). Others recount the emergence of Adam's descendants from his back in the World of the Particles, likening them to fine particles (Kulaynī, [Gregorian Year Equivalent], p. 13). Some emphasize the eventual remembrance of

the place where the covenant was once taken and later forgotten (Qumī, [Gregorian Year Equivalent], p. 248). Certain interpretations attribute the testimony not to humans but to angels (Ṣadūq, [Gregorian Year Equivalent], Vol. 1, p. 118), while others maintain that the covenant was made with all creatures, not only humankind (Kulaynī, [Gregorian Year Equivalent], p. 504). Some narrations further associate the covenant with the innate nature of human beings (Kulaynī, [Gregorian Year Equivalent], p. 12). Although many other interpretations exist, they fall beyond the scope of this discussion. In all these readings, the myth of memory and forgetfulness receives particular attention—an idea later adopted and elaborated by mystics in their allegorical and symbolic narratives.

In the realm of poetry, which is considered a transcendental world, the myth of memory and forgetting holds a special place. In Greek mythology, Mnemosyne is the mother of the Muses and personifies memory. The Muses were nine in number, and all of Zeus's daughters were called Mnemosyne (meaning memory) (Hamilton, [Gregorian Year Equivalent], p. 46). They were the patrons of poetry and music, which is why they are referred to as the nine fairies of the fine arts (Shefa, [Gregorian Year Equivalent], pp. 143ff). Memory and remembrance are so important in Greek myths that "Hermes grants his son Atalides immutable memory to make him immortal" (Eliade, [Gregorian Year Equivalent], p. 107). According to Arab beliefs, jinn inspire the poet and guide him through another realm, often called the Tabi'ah. In ancient Iran, "Mani claimed that he received his message through an intermediary called a 'hamzad' or 'qareen.' This intermediary's name was the angel of revelation or Tabi'ah" (Aqahosseini, [Gregorian Year Equivalent], p. 80). Therefore, one of the myths that has a significant presence both in the realm of mysticism and, unconsciously, in poetry is the myth of memory and forgetting.

As a contemporary poet and pioneer of free verse, Shamlou repeatedly draws upon this myth in his poetry. The following section explores the manifestation of this myth in Shamlou's works.

2. Background and Research Method

Regarding the myth of memory and forgetfulness, Eliade first discussed this theme in his books *Myth and Reality* and *The Mythical Dimension*, where he examined its origins and development among Hindus, Buddhists, Gnostics, Greeks, and others. Following his pioneering studies, several other scholars have explored the concepts of memory and forgetfulness. Zarrinkoub, in his commentary on the story of *Sheikh*

San'an, refers to Ibn Jowzi's *Zamm al-Hawa*, which recounts the stories of those who, falling in love with women, forgot their faith (cf. Ibn Jowzi, 1998, p. 408; Zarrinkoub, 1971, p. 259). Eliade's research serves as the foundational source for these later studies. The myth of memory and forgetfulness has also been examined in Iranian allegorical and symbolic narratives (Hosseini, 2013), as well as in the article "The Myth of 'Memory and Forgetfulness' in *Derakht-e Golabi*" by Roghieh Vahabi Daryakani and Maryam Hosseini (2017). Dr. Esmaeilpour, in his book *The Myth of Creation in Mani's Religion*, refers to the *Pearl Hymn* and, in his interpretation of the story, addresses the motif of memory and forgetfulness. He also analyzes the Gnostic theme of remembrance and oblivion in *Under the Heavens of Light* (cf. Esmaeilpour, 2004; 2011).

In all of these studies, the focus has been on ancient texts or contemporary narratives; however, contemporary Persian poetry has remained largely unexplored in this context. The present article aims to examine and analyze this theme in the poetry of the contemporary poet Ahmad Shamlou—an innovative approach that may help readers gain a deeper insight into modern Persian poetry. To this end, we first conducted a library-based investigation of Shamlou's works, identifying passages related to this concept and compiling relevant notes and excerpts. Subsequently, through a descriptive–analytical method, we examined the various dimensions of this myth in Shamlou's poetry. It is hoped that this research will contribute to a more profound understanding of contemporary Persian poetry.

3. Discussion and Analysis

3.1 Introduction of the Poet

The Iranian free-verse poet Ahmad Shamlou was born on December 12, 1925 (Azar 21, 1304, in the Iranian calendar) in the Safi Ali Shah neighborhood of Tehran. His mother was a Caucasian immigrant who came to Iran during the 1917 Russian Bolshevik Revolution, while his father, Heydar, a descendant of Ismail Mirza Safavi, served as an army officer and was frequently transferred to various cities across the country. As a result, Shamlou's childhood and adolescence were spent in both large and small towns such as Khash, Zahedan, Tabas, and Bam. Living in different regions of Iran, each with its distinct cultural characteristics, nurtured his fascination with folk culture and inspired him to collect colloquial expressions absent from formal dictionaries. This lifelong interest later culminated in his monumental work *Ketab-e Kucheh* (*The Book of Alley*).

Shamlou also lived in Birjand, Mashhad, and Gorgan. His interest in learning foreign languages influenced his education. He was a dedicated individual who wrote actively and paid particular attention to the press. He was first arrested in 1942 for writings against the Allies and was released two years later. By the end of 1946, he served as the editor of the weekly Adib. After the coup d'état of August 19, 1953 (Mordad 28, 1332), some of his poetry was burned, along with several translations and even notes intended for Ketab-e Kucheh, due to the actions of his opponents, and he was imprisoned. He was released one year later. He was influenced by Nima Yushij's poetry and later became an innovator of modern free verse. Shamlou's poetry collections contain many mythological references, including the myth of memory and forgetfulness.

3.2 Memory and Forgetfulness in Shamlou's Poetry

Shamlou is recognized as one of contemporary Persian poetry's foremost myth-makers. In his free verse, both direct and indirect references to the myth of memory and forgetfulness can be observed. At times, this myth emerges under the influence of Gnostic and Indian thought, evoking the ancient narratives of these traditions; at other times, it manifests in forms shaped by post-Islamic mystical and religious texts. The following analysis explores these manifestations in two sections.

3.2.1 The Myth of Memory and Forgetfulness from a Gnostic and Indian Perspective

As noted in the introduction, the myth of memory and forgetfulness appears in Gnostic, Indian, Greek, and Buddhist literatures, as well as in Persian works from the Islamic period. Shamlou, as a free-verse poet, occasionally employs expressions and statements that bear traces of this myth. In his collection *Qat'nameh* (*Termination Letter*), in the first poem, he invokes the myth of memory and forgetfulness during a dialogue with Ayda as follows:

> …an image not unlike / that if it forgot her smile / and if her cheeks were probed / in search of life / and if furrows lifted her forehead / from the passage of times chained with the chains of slavery / it would become me! / it would become me / exactly! / it would become me, who silently carries the stones of my prison on my shoulders / and imprisons the striving of my soul / within the four walls of words that / burst their silence / in the void of melodies / that probes without the gaze of eyes / in the desert of colors… / it would become me / exactly! (Shamlou, 2003, pp. 51–52).

In these lines, Shamlou employs motifs such as slavery, the search for life, imprisonment, and the void of melodies, each of which evokes narratives of memory and forgetfulness. The image of "prison" recalls the story of Matsyendra, who discovers himself through the songs of Gorakhnath, and simultaneously reconstructs in the reader's mind the epic of the *Pearl*, in which a prince, imprisoned in the palace of the king of Egypt, finds himself through the words of his father's letter.

In his long poem *"The Song of a Man Who Killed Himself,"* Shamlou appears to depict the self as estranged from itself:

> …it had my name / and no one was as close to me / and it alienated me / from you, and alienated me / from myself… / whose garment is the longing for a shirt and wants, in its solitude, to drag itself to the rack / but I did not give it the opportunity / and plunged a dagger / into its throat / spinning a forgotten melody in the drum of its throat / and in a long dying / it became cold / and a drop of blood dripped from its throat / to the ground / just one drop! / the blood of forgotten melodies (Shamlou, 2003, p. 154).

Here, Shamlou's imagery of alienation, death, and forgotten melodies evokes the Gnostic and Indian interpretations of the myth, highlighting the tension between memory, self-recognition, and the existential struggle to reclaim what has been lost or forgotten. The poem explicitly manifests the myth of memory and forgetfulness in the line, "He alienated me from myself." Moreover, the reference to a forgotten melody recalls the Indian story of Matsyendranath, evoking the same melodies through which Gorakhnath awakens his master from negligence.

In other passages, Shamlou evokes the myth of memory and forgetfulness as follows: "Life sings a bitter song from beneath the stone walls of the prison / In the eyes of the transformed dolls, a radiant guiding lamp shines / My city rediscovers the dance of its alleys" (Shamlou, 2003, p. 154). In these lines, the reader is reminded of the Hindu myth through motifs such as prison, dance, and transformation—echoing the story of Matsyendranath, who, captured by women, rediscovers himself through the dance and song of his disciple. The term "transformation" further alludes to the concept of reincarnation, reminiscent of figures like Pythagoras, who is said to have remembered all his past lives.

Later in the same poem, Shamlou draws upon Buddhist beliefs in the myth of memory and forgetfulness: "You speak to me of light and of humans, who are kin to all gods" (Shamlou, 2003, p. 220). The notion of human–divine kinship also alludes

to the Qur'anic verse, "And I breathed into him of My Spirit" (Qur'an, 15:29), signifying that God has instilled a part of His spirit within humans. In Buddhist thought, it is said that when the memory of certain deities became disturbed or confused, they fell from heaven to earth and assumed human form. Some of them practiced austerity, meditation, and contemplation, and through yogic discipline, succeeded in recalling their past lives. In these lines, Shamlou conveys this closeness between humans and gods. This perspective is similarly reiterated in his poem *The Bond*:

> Thirteen sacrifices, thirteen Heracles / Were reduced to ashes at the gates of the Greek temple / And all thirteen / Were me / Three hundred thousand hands, three hundred thousand gods / In the hills of the palace of gods, merged into one in a circle of chains / And those three hundred thousand / Are me (Shamlou, 2003, p. 237).

In Gnostic thought, the human soul is believed to become subject to forgetfulness upon dwelling in matter. This intertwining of soul and body, and the consequent lapse of memory, is reflected in Shamlou's poetry:

> My cry was alien to my heart / I was the alien melody of my heartbeat; for I was not yet more than a wandering breath; for I had not yet sung my song; for my strings and stones were still fused together / And I was stone and string, I was bird and cage (Shamlou, 2003, p. 244).

The poet further depicts forgetfulness and the struggle to reclaim humanity: "The forgotten streamed from lakes, plains, and hills to save the ailing truth and to command the forgetful to remember humanity" (Shamlou, 2003, p. 245).

In the Hindu myths of memory and forgetfulness, there is a story of a man who was captured by robbers, blindfolded, and left in a remote corner far from the city. He cried out, "I have been brought here blindfolded: I have been left here blindfolded!" Eventually, someone removed the blindfold and guided him back to his city. The man wandered from village to village until he finally reached his home. This narrative illustrates that anyone who receives sufficient guidance can be freed from the veil of ignorance (the blindfold) and ultimately attain perfection (Eliade, 2013, pp. 121–122).

Shamlou appears to allude to this Hindu story in one of his poems: "…all this / victory is regret / The return of all visions / When the sun / Has eternally burdened

the journey…" (Shamlou, 2003, p. 669). Here, the "return of all visions" evokes the hero of the Hindu myth regaining his sight, while the sun's burden and the approaching darkness subtly symbolize forgetfulness.

Another remarkable work, the poem *Resurrection*, reconstructs the myth of memory and forgetfulness from beginning to end. In this poem, traces of Eastern thought on reincarnation also emerge:

I was all the dead / Dead birds that sing / and are silent / Deadest of beautiful creatures / On land and in water / Dead humans, of good and evil / I was there / In the past / Songless / No secret with me / No smile / No longing / With love / You saw me untimely in sleep/ And awake with you (Shamlou, 2003, p. 836).

In this poem, the protagonist speaks of a past devoid of longing. This passage may allude to the period before the Fall of Man, when he dwelled in a celestial realm free from suffering. The poem's final references to sleep and awakening further evoke the theme of memory and forgetfulness. The realm of the Fall can be seen as analogous to sleep, which follows negligence and the first sin. Humans in paradise were initially aware, yet through negligence, a veil of forgetfulness was cast over them, and they came to be named human.

3.2.2 Myth of Memory and Forgetfulness in Post-Islamic Texts

In post-Islamic texts, the myth of memory and forgetfulness manifests in various ways under the influence of multiple factors in Iranian literature. On the one hand, Quranic interpretations and references to the primordial world (ʿĀlam-i Ẓarr) and humans' forgetfulness of the Covenant of Alast, and on the other, narrative works shaped by the literature of other nations, present this myth in diverse forms. Authors such as Ibn Sina, Suhrawardi, and Attar adopt this approach in their stories, wherein the protagonists err due to forgetfulness and subsequently, through recollection and necessary reminders, move closer to the truth.

Regarding the primordial world (ʿĀlam-i Ẓarr), Muslim scholars hold that before the material world, humans once dwelled in this realm but forgot all, occasionally recalling fragments of it. Shamlou captures this idea in his poetry:

No name anywhere and everywhere / No time ever and always... / Ah, when I came to speak like a shadow / Without my lips parting / And passed like a tomorrow from the past / Without the flesh of my memory decaying (Shamlou, 2003, p. 270).

In these lines, the poet presents the primordial world as timeless and placeless, emphasizing its indescribable nature, as suggested by the image of lips not opening.

In this primordial world, humans may have also perceived their anima, or lost half, so that despite unfamiliarity, it feels familiar. As Shamlou notes, one "quickly becomes familiar with what he had found late" (Shamlou, 2005, p. 235). This principle is further illustrated in his poem *Tardid* (*Doubt*):

I seemed to have seen him in a hazy and vague evening dream... …

"He opened his lips and said something in reply / Yet his voice resembled the voices of distant, lost loves / The warm lullaby of his figure's lines covered in the veil of fog / I seemed to have seen him in a hazy and vague evening dream... (Shamlou, 2003, p. 127).

In these lines, the anima—or the beloved representing the poet's lost half—is depicted as someone apparently seen before, evoking a sense of recognition despite temporal or spatial distance.

A notable feature of the anima is its ambiguity and anonymity. Shamlou writes: "Face to face, you do not recognize him / As if you consider him a passing stranger / Yet, when you look back / You wonder with yourself: / He seems so familiar / As if it were yesterday" (Shamlou, 2003, p. 931). Here, the poet initially fails to recognize the anima, but upon retrospection recalls it, evoking the primordial world and ancient times. His murmur to the anima continues:

If the cry of the bird and the shadow of the grass / In your solitude reveal this truth / The truth is great and I am small, alien to you / Hear the cry of the bird / Mix the shadow of the grass with your shadow / Make me familiar with you, my stranger / Unite me with yourself (Shamlou, 2003, p. 217).

In these lines, Shamlou acknowledges his distance from the truth and strives to become familiar with and united with it. This effort exemplifies recollection and reminder, central elements of the myth of memory and forgetfulness. The human pursuit of truth and the memory of the primordial world are further emphasized in the lines: "Humans also strive for the truth / Humans are also kin to eternity / I am not alien to eternity" (Shamlou, 2003, p. 220).

In the poem *Sarcheshmeh* (*The Spring*), the myth of memory and forgetfulness is evoked: "Something within me subsided / Something within me bloomed / I returned to the cradle of my childhood in sleep / And recovered the smile of that

time" (Shamlou, 2003, p. 222). Here, the poet's return to sleep symbolizes the reclamation of memory and the myth of forgetfulness, enabling the recall of distant pasts or the primordial world.

In *Ghazal-e Bozorg* (*The Great Ghazal*), Shamlou evokes an ethereal night in which he seems to encounter the anima, reflecting the themes of memory and forgetfulness. He writes: "Although I have killed a human within myself" (forgetfulness) and later: "Although I have birthed a human within myself" (alluding to immortality), confirming the myth: "Although in my painful silence I have known life and death / Yet between these two, the branch of my separated self, / Between these two / I / am the anchor of the ceaseless labor of my pain" (Shamlou, 2003, p. 672). The duality expressed here clearly references memory and forgetfulness. In the same poem, he continues: "Throughout my wakefulness / Every symbol and manifestation / I perceived with deep pain / Love came, and my pain fled my soul / At the moment I went to sleep / Beginning arose from the end" (Shamlou, 2003, p. 672). Here, "wakefulness" evokes the myth of memory, while "going to sleep" symbolizes forgetfulness. The phrase "beginning arose from the end" alludes to the primordial world or the Covenant of Alast. Similarly, in his poem *Hekayat* (*Story*, p. 678), Shamlou likens himself to a gazelle seeking its identity, striving to return to the origin—a realm connected to the primordial or pre-Fall world, which humans eternally yearn for. The human condition is marked by forgetting this primordial world and longing for the pre-Fall paradise.

In other poems, this myth recurs:

They had told us / The sacred word / We will teach you / Yet for that / You must endure a soul-crushing punishment / We bore the excruciating punishment / Yes / for our sacred word / once / escaped our memory!

This forgetfulness of the sacred word may evoke the Covenant of Alast or the primordial world, as mentioned in Surah Al-A'raf. The theme of lost knowledge or memory is evident throughout Shamlou's poetry. For instance, in the nocturnal poem:

Evening flight of cranes / and the return of winds / in the grave of your memory, dust / from a stone drifts / your hidden thing teaches: / something you perhaps knew / something you surely knew in distant times (Shamlou, 2003, p. 797).

Attention to the primordial world is also evident in lines such as:

Absolute darkness of blindness / the deathly feeling of loneliness / - what hour is it? (crosses your mind) / what day / what month / from which year, which century, which date, which planet? (Shamlou, 2003, p. 967).

These questions evoke the early days of creation and the inherent forgetfulness of that primordial time. In other lines, Shamlou explicitly presents the primordial world as part of the myth:

We too once / for a moment, a year, a century, a millennium before this / stood here / on this planet, on this soil / in a narrow opportunity – the like of this – /...

Additionally, in the sequence Hejran (Separation), the myth appears again. In the first poem, the poet asks: "When have I lived?" as if in endless astonishment, continuing: "Which continuous set of days and nights?" (Shamlou, 2003, p. 809). He seeks the primordial time or his past, now forgotten after the spirit's embodiment in the body. This forgetfulness brings suffering, as he describes:

Look at the world entirely / which, in the robe of the lethargy of its ruined sleep / is alien to itself / And look at us awake / alert to our sorrow / furious and aggressive / guarding our bitter grief / grim guardians of our suffering (Shamlou, 2003, p. 814).

In mysticism, this suffering is pivotal, and Attar regards it as the beginning of the human spiritual journey (Nikrouz, 2008, p. 210). This mystical pain permeates all creation, with humans more conscious of it due to their awareness (Zarrinkoub, 1999, p. 167). It may be the pain of love, separation, or longing, over which Shamlou demonstrates full mastery.

The origin of alienation and loneliness in this world is clearly articulated in the allegorical treatises of Avicenna and Suhrawardi. As Pournamdarían (2011, p. 43) notes,

The Illuminationist philosopher's feeling in this world is a sense of estrangement and remoteness from the world of light and the East or the spiritual realm. The material and dark world, or the West, is the exile of the soul or rational self.

Shamlou conveys this Illuminationist perspective in another of his

longing" poems: "Sorrow / is not here / but there / yet the heart / beats in the cold of this black chamber / in this joyless exile…

In these verses, "here" refers to the material world, while the "black chamber" serves as a metaphor for this world, sometimes likened to a well in allegorical narratives. "There" signifies the spiritual realm. Later in the poem, he adds:

We crack the shell-less almond / remembering the homelands / and the bitterness of hell/ passes through every vein of ours (Shamlou, 2003, p. 816).

Here, "remembering the homelands" evokes a past existence now recalled with pain—a golden time in an eternal paradise or a period free of grief and suffering that has been lost.

Distance from homeland, alienation, and wandering recur in other poems by Shamlou, reflecting the myth of memory and forgetfulness. In one poem, he writes:

Where is the homeland, that your familiar voice seems so far? / Where is hope, so that the world itself / may return / to order (Shamlou, 2003, p. 829).

The inquiry into the original homeland and the familiarity of the beloved's voice is shaped by the myth of memory and forgetfulness and is closely connected to the myth of the Fall, evoking the memory of a first golden age.

The hero of memory and forgetfulness is essentially in search of himself. Having forgotten his identity and past, he must seek them within his memories, even though his memory no longer aids him:

I searched among the books / among the dusty old newspapers / in my memories / in a memory that no longer helps. I searched for myself and for tomorrow… (Shamlou, 2003, p. 847).

These memories, sought in exile and forgetfulness, also appear in lines such as:

I was not born of a mother today / No / the age of the world has passed over me / my nearest memory is a memory of centuries / … / remember… (Shamlou, 2003, p. 882).

In these verses, the phrase "the age of the world has passed over me" evokes the primordial realm, suggesting that the hero has experienced the entirety of the world. The "memory of centuries" thus becomes his own, reflecting a consciousness that transcends the physical and earthly realm.

This discourse style also appears on page 911:

Where was that world / that now has barred its way into my memory?… /
Where are you / that I am? / And where is our geography?

The search for the original world and the supramundane realm is prominent at the beginning of the poem, while, toward the end, philosophical questions emerge concerning one's own being and the nature of the world. All these symbols form part of the richly branched myth of memory and forgetfulness.

In another poem, Shamlou seemingly alludes to the story of Salaman and Absāl, a tale that has been narrated in various forms, the most famous of which was recorded by Hunayn ibn Ishaq. In the narrative of *Hayy ibn Yaqdhan*, the story unfolds as follows: In ancient times, a pious king named Hermanus ruled over Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Desiring a long life and, due to his piety, refraining from intimacy with women, he had no heir. Seeking assistance from the court philosopher, Aqliqulas, the king received help in creating a human-like body into which he placed his seed, resulting in the birth of a son named Salaman.

Salaman is entrusted to a young nurse named Absāl. As he grows, Salaman falls in love with his nurse. When the king learns of this, he warns his son against such behavior. Nevertheless, Salaman and Absāl flee their land to the shores of the Western Sea. The king, observing them through his all-seeing cup, punishes them by intensifying their love while simultaneously depriving them of the ability to consummate it. Driven to despair by this deprivation, Salaman and Absāl decide to commit suicide, walking hand in hand toward the sea to drown themselves. However, the king commands the sea, through his all-seeing cup, to part its waves away from Salaman's body, saving him while Absāl drowns.

Salaman, overwhelmed with grief, is on the verge of death. The king seeks help from his sage, Aqliqulās. The sage promises Salaman that he will bring Absāl back to him. He takes Salaman to the cave of Sāriqūn, dresses him in Absāl's clothes, and instructs him in seclusion and fasting. Then he conjures an imaginary image of Absāl and shows it to Salaman, allowing him to unite with it.

For forty days, the sage presents Salaman with the image of Absāl daily, while simultaneously summoning the image of Venus, the goddess of beauty. On the fortieth day, when Salaman's period of seclusion is complete, the sage reveals Venus's face to him. Salaman falls in love with Venus and forgets Absāl. The sage ensures that Venus's image remains constantly before him. Through his love for Venus, Salaman attains inner purity, develops the aptitude and merit for kingship, and eventually succeeds his father.

Salaman orders the story to be written and placed in his father Hermannus's tomb within the Egyptian pyramids. Years later, Aristotle and Alexander, following the instructions of their teacher Plato, open the pyramids and disseminate the story of Salaman and Absāl throughout the world. Hunayn ibn Ishaq translates the story from Greek into Arabic (see Sajjadi, 2003), and Avicenna also retells it. Shamlou may have drawn upon this allegorical narrative in his poem:

Father, O boundless love, how is it that you chose me for this mission and left me in such solitude? I cannot bear this pain; set me free, set me free, set me free, O Father (Shamlou, 2003, p. 919).

Although these verses can be interpreted as alluding to the crucifixion of Christ, their language also evokes the story of Salaman and Absāl, which is grounded in the myth of remembrance and forgetting. This is particularly evident in the opening line of the poem:

The crucified man / returned to himself once more.

This return to oneself can be read as a metaphor for recollection.

In the poem *Sefr-e Shohud*, Shamlou engages throughout with the myths of creation, the Fall, and remembrance and forgetting. Phrases such as

I was unaware of myself / when there was neither heaven nor / serpent nor apple / nor the fig of Bani that taught / the seam of wheat / shame (Shamlou, 2003, p. 987)

evoke the myth of creation and the Fall. Later, with lines like

a star, fleeing in coquetry / on its dry and wet orbit / suddenly from birth and / unaware of death/...,

he depicts the myth of remembrance and forgetting. Questions such as

Which bed were you asleep-awake on? ... / Which mother gave birth to the grown newborn?

further reference this myth. These lines also illustrate primordial knowledge in the world of pre-existence:

From where did you learn all this?

To reconstruct the creation myth, he writes:

I was that nameless stone in that first turmoil / I was that silent fragment of stillness in that boredom without self / I was that being without place / I was that being without time... (Shamlou, 2003, p. 990).

In another poem, Shamlou depicts the world as a cage and humans as birds, a motif frequently referenced in allegorical narratives:

Cage / cage, this cage, this cage / bird / in its sleep forgets / but I see it in my sleep / that I, awake, / fully shape / from the cage (Shamlou, 2003, p. 992).

In the myths of remembrance and forgetfulness, the effort to stay awake and keep vigil is one of the ways to recall and escape the realm of oblivion. For instance, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus instructs his disciples not to sleep in order to prevent disaster. Similarly, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, when seeking the plant of immortality, Gilgamesh must remain awake for six days and nights. In his poem *"Night Watchers,"* Shamlou appears to reference this myth:

All night I marveled at it / marveled at the awake city / whose eyes burned with fire / and whose thought was not of sleep / ... sleepless city / with the smoky fire of its wakefulness / in a sacred night / I said, 'Did you not sleep, city!' / All night in whispers / what were you anxious for? / They said, to see the rising day / we kept vigil with prayer (Shamlou, 2003, pp. 1038–1039).

In this poem, expressions such as "awake city," "sacred night," "not sleeping," and "rising day" all allude to the myth of remembrance.

Humans are not thinking of sleep and forgetfulness; yet sleep overcomes them, preventing Gilgamesh from retaining the plant of immortality and hindering the perception of truth in other stories. In the story of Sheikh San'an, love casts a veil over Sheikh San'an's eyes, plunging him into forgetfulness. In the story of Salaman and Absal, forgetting the truth drives the plot, and in Hindu and Gnostic myths, the motif of remembrance and forgetfulness plays a prominent role in shaping the life stories of individuals.

4. Conclusion

As a contemporary poet, Ahmad Shamlou can be seen to navigate states of heightened awareness and sublimity, wherein his work frequently engages with questions

emanating from the myth of memory and forgetfulness. His poetry, representing some of the most complex forms of modern free verse, often provides a foundation for allusions to established myths while simultaneously facilitating a form of personal mythopoesis. Within this framework, the myth of memory and forgetfulness emerges as a particularly prominent motif, manifesting in several key ways:

- **Intertwining with the myth of the Fall:** In this configuration, the prelapsarian period may be interpreted as a time of primordial memory, while the post-Fall condition is characterized by forgetfulness. The poet evokes this contrast with a palpable sense of nostalgia.
- **The figure of the Anima:** This familiar yet elusive presence can be understood as a manifestation of the myth. In liminal encounters, she represents an object of memory that remains ultimately unrecallable, thereby embodying the tension between remembering and forgetting.
- **Allusions to the primordial particle and pre-eternal covenant:** References to *al-'Alam al-Dharr* and the events of the pre-eternal covenant occasionally appear in Shamlou's poetry. These evocations function as reminders of the myth, posing challenging questions that implicitly urge both poet and reader toward contemplation.
- **Influence of Hindu and Gnostic traditions:** In poems with social and political undertones, narratives drawn from these traditions—such as the tales of Matsyendranath and the Black Pearl—appear to resonate. These stories may unconsciously evoke embedded myths of memory and forgetfulness for the reader.
- **Themes of separation and estrangement:** Particularly in the serialized *Hajrani* (poems of separation), these themes often suggest origins in the myth of memory and forgetfulness, commonly intertwined with elements of mystical suffering.
- **Imagery suggesting reincarnation:** Certain poems contain imagery that can be interpreted as indirect references to the principle of reincarnation, a concept intrinsically linked in some belief systems to cycles of memory and forgetfulness.

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