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The Armenian Legend of Ara and Semiramis: A Comparative Study of Queen Semiramis' Controversial Portrayal in English Children's Adaptation of the Legend

ABSTRACT

Over the centuries till this day, Queen Semiramis is considered one of the most renowned female figures of Ancient times in cultural memory. Historical sources depict her with both admiration and terrible hate. The problem of the study lies in the negative, inaccurate portrayal of queen Semiramis in Armenian legends for adult and for children as well. The researchers aimed at studying the Armenian Legend Ara and Semiramis that is adapted by for English children readers to address the inaccuracies and explain the controversy. Selected the Armenian legend of Ara and Semiramis by Zabelle C. Boyajian and the completely identical children's version adapted by Anon Mouse. The researchers have concluded that all negative, inaccuracies and controversy regarding the portrayal of Queen Semiramis' personality is highly influenced by political and religious agenda. Thus, they recommend spreading awareness about this great queen and highlighting all hidden reasons for distorting the image of this Mesopotamian queen.

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الاسطورة الارمنية ارا وسميراميس : دراسة مقارنة لتجسيد شخصية سميراميس المثيرة للجدل في النسخة المتبناة من الاسطورة للأطفال باللغة الانكليزية

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الخلاصة:

على مر التاريخ الى يومنا هذا تعد الملكة سميراميس احد اشهر الملكات النساء منذ غابر الزمان. الكثير من المصادر التاريخية تجسدها بالأعجاب تارة وبالكراهة تارة اخرى. تكمن مشكلة البحث في تجسيد الملكة سميراميس بصورة سلبية وغير صحيحة تاريخيا في الاساطير الارمنية للبالغين وللصغار على حد سواء.

يهدف البحث الى دراسة شخصية سميراميس في ادب الاطفال حسب اسطورة ارا وسميراميس الارمنية لتحليل السلبيات وشرح التناقضات التاريخية المتعلقة بشخصيتها. استنتج الباحثان ان وراء التجسيد السلبي لهذه الملكة الاشورية اسباب سياسية ودينية وعليه تم التوصية بزيادة الوعي الخاص بهذه الشخصية الرافدينية العظيمة .

الكلمات المفتاحية : الامبراطورية الاشورية، السحر البابلي، الاسر البابلي، نمرود، سنحاريب ، المملكتان البابليتان.

1. Introduction :-

Semiramis was not always positively portrayed in all works that depicted her as a main character. Over the centuries till this day she is one of the most renowned female figures of Ancient times in cultural memory. Historical sources depict her with both admiration and terrible hate. During the medieval and early modern periods, her figure appeared in all forms of literature and art. One could even argue that the persona of Semiramis has elicited such awe in the European realms of literature as well as theatre. There are several academic articles about Semiramis from a wide range of disciplines (Droß-Krüpe, 2020, p. 16). She inspired the mind of European writers, artists and historians to write about her. She influenced the Italian medieval author Dante, who included her in his poem the Divine Comedy. Voltaire, the French Enlightenment writer, penned a tragedy about her that was eventually adapted into Rossini's opera (Semiramide) (Gutiérrez, 2017). She is the main characters in the fourth book of *the Metamorphoses: the daughters of Minyas*, by the Roman poet Ovidius Naso. William Shakespeare also mentioned her in his play *Titus Andronicus*, *The Taming of the Shrew* (Bradshaw et al., 2006, p.326), and also in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Hopkins, 2016, p.64). Semiramis continued to inspire writers till this day like in Edward Peple's *Semiramis* (2014), Maya Daneils' *Semiramis Series* (2019), and Ewa Kassala's *Semiramis* (2021).

1.1.Semiramis in Children's Literature

The female monarchs were uncommon in ancient Mesopotamia. Those who did govern, however, left their imprint on history. Semiramis was example of beauty, wisdom and she was credited with several achievements such as leader of armies and constructor of Babylon's walls and memorials throughout her realm (Gutiérrez, 2017). Because of her great achievements as a

Mesopotamian queen, many authors adapted her stories to children's literature such as *Semiramis : Child of The Doves* by Marianna Mayer (1999), *Semiramis: Conquering Queen-Annotated Legend* (2014) by George J. Whyte-Melville, *Ara and Semiramis: Baba Indaba Children's Stories*(2016) by Anon E Mouse, and *Queen Semiramis: The Legend*(2020) by Ingrid de Haas.

The problem of the study lies in the negative, inaccurate portrayal of queen Semiramis in Armenian legends for adult and for children as well. The researchers aimed at studying the Armenian Legend *Ara and Semiramis* that is adapted by for English children readers to address the inaccuracies and explain the controversy.

2. Ara and Semiramis : Armenian Legend

Zabelle C. Boyajian presented an Armenian point of view of Semiramis legend in her *Ara and Semiramis* that is transformed fully to children's adaptation of the legend without any change by Anon E. Mouse in 2016.

Both Boyajian's adult version and Mouse's children version start with; Umntwana Izwe, the storyteller. The children gather around him and he begins to tell the story; the story happened in a very far time, before the death of the King of Nineveh, Ninsn. The queen of Nineveh, Semiramis, had heard a lot about the handsome Armenian king Ara, but she did nothing until her husband King Ninus died. After the death of her husband, she sent messengers with many gifts to the king Ara so that he would come to Nineveh and marry her, but he refused. She marched her armies towards Armenia. She ordered her men to bring to her Ara alive, but Ara was killed in the battle, so she sent her soldiers to search for his body. They found his body and ordered them to lay it in the highest room in the castle. She told the Armenian army, that she had asked the God to lick his wounds so that Ara would come back to life again. Her purpose was to calm the Armenians; who wanted to continue the fight to avenge his death. Meanwhile, the queen tried to use magic and witchcraft to bring him back to life, but his corpse began to decay. Eventually, she ordered her servants to bury it in a deep grave. Dressing up one her soldiers as Ara, Semiramis stood in front of the Armenians and told them that the god had brought Ara back to life in a more glorified way than before and ordered them to make statues to worship the gods more and more and appeared as if Ara was brought back to life and spread this news in all the land of Armenia.

The people believed that Ara was revived, and Semiramis was saved from another battle waged against her. She took Ara's son from his wife Norvart, who was 12 years old, and put him on the throne of his father, taking over the rule of the land of Armenia, and thus Izwe ends his story, which he heard about King Ara and Semiramis.

3. Discussion and Analysis:

As mentioned earlier, Queen Semiramis is a highly controversial female character to be introduced to adults let alone to children. Historically speaking, Sammu-Ramat was the Assyrian Empire's queen. She had other names such as Shammuramat and Sammuramat, but she was widely known by her Greek name Semiramis. As a historical figure many facts about her are questionable (Mark,2014). She was the wife of Shamshi-Adad V yet after the death of her husband, she became governor for five years while her son Adad- nirari was still a child. According to historian Gwendolyn Leick (2010), "This woman achieved remarkable fame and power in her lifetime and beyond. According to contemporary records, she had considerable influence at the Assyrian court" (155) she is famous for joining her spouse on a military campaign, which was uncommon for an Assyrian queen (Leick, 2010, p. 155). Because Assyria was officially controlled by kings for the whole 1400 years of its history (Lassen & Wagensooner, 2020,p. 48), Semiramis as a female Assyrian military leader become the center of mythical tales (Leick, 2010 , p. 155). She was known by Greeks, Assyrians, Armenians, and others major civilizations at that time as a semi-divine queen (Mark, 2014) a demi god born from a goddess mother and a human father. Her mother abandoned her in the desert (Souchal et al., 1974), thus, she was nurtured by doves. The stories about Semiramis are mostly attributed to the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, who quoted an older work by Ctesias, that is now lost. The name Sammu-Ramat occurred in the historical record for being able to give the kingdom the stability it required. Historians argue that, it seems so unbelievable that the people of Assyria, especially men, to be successfully ruled by a woman. Maybe that is why her achievements created awe greater than that of any male monarch because it was uncommon for women to achieve such leadership success (Mark,2014). History, although filled with controversy, showed without doubt that Semiramis was an Assyrian queen who defeated the Medes and Armenians and all myths and legends sprang from the achievements of a real historical lady, Sammu-Ramat (Mark,2014). Besides her beauty, Semiramis is gifted with cleverness and courage. She is famous for being a great leader and a warrior – queen. She is known for her dove symbol that is associated with the great mother goddess Ishtar that is why some confuse the two characters

together. As for the Assyrians, they revere the dove as a deity; because it associated with Semiramis since she nurtured by a flock of doves in her childbirth and after her death she transformed into a dove. This Assyrian belief leads them to immortalizes Semiramis as the immortal dove (Lewis & Llewellyn-Jones, 2018,pp. 324-327).

Unfortunately, after analyzing the Armenian legend of Semiramis for both adult and children, only negative portrayal of her personality is depicted.

In both Boyajian and Mouse's Armenian legends Semiramis is portrayed as a powerful, deceitful, lustful female character, who planned to attack Armenia just to bring its handsome king. She ordered her army to bring the handsome king alive to her, but he died in the battle. The deceitful and cunning side of her character appeared after the death of Ara when the Armenian Army wanted to avenge their king, she made the Arminian believe she would asked god to bring the king back to life while at the same time she tried to resurrect him with witchcraft but she failed.

Magic was considered respectable and part of the established religion in Mesopotamia. Along with witchcraft, magic in Mesopotamia were ordinary rituals that address an individual's requirements, crises, and wishes that are classified as magical (Abusch, 2009, p.373). Although magic was illogical, it was the guiding concept through which Mesopotamians comprehended numerous natural phenomena and their good and bad implications. Celestial omens, for the Assyrians, could indicate that the Assyrian king is in potential threat or foretell favorable combat conditions. Magic might also be employed to protect against the curse that followed from inadvertently committing a transgression. A Mesopotamian magician's responsibilities could fall under a variety of disciplines, including magical, scientific, medical, literary, and religious (Said, 2018).

Numerous cuneiform inscriptions produced in both the Sumerian and Akkadian languages throughout the duration of about 2,500 years (c.2600-100 BCE) refer to personal crises and individual suffering (Abusch, 2009, p.373). These personal crises can present themselves in any area of human existence whether medically, psychologically, psychosomatically, or socioeconomically plane. The main agencies and sources of damage are

Gods, demons, ghosts, witches, evil omens, curses, and crimes. As a result most Mesopotamians believed that magic heals illness and other similar life troubles and changes. Magical operations may subsequently be conducted in order to solve the problem, these practices, most commonly, performed by an exorcist (asipu) on for the person in distress.(Abusch, 2020, p.27). The wide spread of magic and witchcraft in Mesopotamia is counterpartyed with anti – witchcraft rituals and if one take The Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-witchcraft Rituals, by the editors Tzvi Abusch and Daniel Schweme as an example, one can be astonished to see the bulk of such practices. This corpus consists of hundreds of magical and medicinal manuscripts including a wide range of variety elements that has been collected and compiled from historical Mesopotamian clay tablets (Abusch, 2009, p.373).

Consequently when Semiramis told the Armenians she can bring Ara back to life, they believed her out of belief in her Mesopotamian magical heritage. She dressed up like an Armenian soldier and told them that Ara was brought back to life by god and ordered them to worshipped gods more and more because they answered their prayers:

The gods have licked Ara and have brought him back to life again, thus fulfilling our prayers and our pleasure. Therefore from this time forth shall they be the more glorified and worshipped by us, for that they are the givers of joy and the fulfillers of desire.(Mouse, 2015).

In Mouse's version, Semiramis is portrayed as a witch practicing witchcraft on the dead king Ara, trying to bring him back to live again not for the sake of his people but to satisfy her own desires "she thought to bring Ara back to life by witchcraft and charms, for she was maddened by the intensity of her desires"(Mouse,2015). However, she failed because Ara's corpse began to decay. The illustration shows Semiramis seated on a wooden chair staring at the corps of the king laid on a wooden bed ornamented with flower. The room is decorated with Gilgamesh holding his lion, along other famous figures showing the great civilizations that this queen descended from.

In the original adult version by Boyajian, the illustration contains more details of her rituals for the corps is laid on a bed with hanging chamomiles above that are known for their healing powers, Semiramis appeared to be chanting and pointing on a large burning flame with

smoke floating in the air. The walls of the room have Tiamat, the goddess of chaos, and Nisroch. Nisroch or eagle – headed winged man is the Assyrian god of agriculture and the emblem of Anu, the god of sky. According to Hebrew bible, King Sennacherib is said to worship as an idol after bringing it from Jerusalem and it was a part of Noah's ark. It was at his temple he was assassinated by his two sons (Tenney, 2010). This divine deity is depicted in many bas – reliefs holding water vessel to water the sacred tree of life in his left hand and his right hand a pine cone both used for purification rituals. (Gauding, 2009).

According to the Akkadian magical sequence Maqlû, "Burning," that is the longest text and the most important Mesopotamian tablets that deal with witchcraft (Abusch, 2009, p.379). The exorcist priests uttered magic spells were used in healing ceremonies to cure the sicknesses (Annus, 2019). Maqlû is made up of eight spell tablets plus an additional ceremonial tablet. The text recorded of on the Ritual Tablet about one hundred magic spells (Abusch, 2015, p.4). The ritual was designed to resist and remove bad magic and its effects, protect the victim, and punish and make ineffective those who perpetrated the evil. The ceremony was held at the end of the month of Abu (July/August) throughout a single night and into the next morning. Because they thought at this time the spirits were considered to wander back and forth between the underworld and this world (Abusch, 2009, p.379).

The ritual itself concentrated on magic spells and the practice of rites such as figure burning, fumigation, salving, washing, burial, and safety against future assault. Each part concentrated on a separate set of rites: part one, burning and dousing witch figurines; part two, fumigation and guarding of the patient's residence, as well as massaging the victim; and division three, bathing the patient over witch representations (Abusch, 2009, p.379). Apparently the illustration has two different perspectives. Although the Armenian legend incriminate Semiramis witchcraft in the storyline and the illustration, the same illustration can be taken as if she is performing anti – witchcraft rituals in order to bring Ara back to life. Failing to do so, she ordered that his body had to be buried deep in the ground.

Unfortunately, Semiramis' reputation with witchcraft travelled far more than her military campaigns. As mentioned earlier, Hebrews was held captive in Babylonia for more than seventy years after their captivity on the hands of the Assyrian King Sennacherib. He is the most famous

Neo Assyrian king due to his war against the Hebrews and is mentioned several times in the Hebrew Bible. Sennacherib led a campaign against all those who dared to revolt against him, he destroyed the great city of Babylon, made Nineveh the capital of the Assyrian Empire and marched to all cities who dared to defy him and managed to control them again forcing them to pay tribute to him as their king. Although Sennacherib marched to Jerusalem and failed to capture the city, he managed to conquer the surrounding cities after the famous siege of Lachish. This siege is documented not only in the bible but in a series of well-preserved Lachish relief, the walls that decorated the palace of King Sennacherib at Nineveh. In this relief, now displayed in the Jewish section of British Museum, all the brutality, pain, torture, humiliation and killings that the Hebrews were subjected to during the Assyrian campaign is depicted in details (Amin, 2017).

During these long decades although Hebrews deeply loathed their captives, they were affected by the Mesopotamian frame of mind adapting many of their beliefs and culture and retelling stories about them tempered with their bitter emotions. Many stories emerged in which Semiramis is in fact the whore of Babel and is in fact Nimrod's wife based on Hislop's Theory. Nimrod is the infamous great grandson of Prophet Noah mentioned in the Bible known in Judaism and Christianity as the pagan king who challenged God by trying to murder Prophet Ibrahim and the construction of the tower of Babel (Grabbe, 1997, p.28). Although this marriage is not only historical incorrect, it is impossible due to the different time periods the two existed at. Unfortunately, Christian religious figures used this false marriage to introduce the pagane trinity idea. The most famous of these examples is the *Two Babylons*. Alexander Hislop, in his book *The Two Babylons*, published during the nineteenth-century claimed the Catholic Church was a satanic cult (Grabbe, 1997, p.28) claiming that the reverence of Mary and the Christ child was, from the pagan worship of Nimrod and Semiramis. (Fee & Webb, 2019, p. 96).

According to Hislop, the pagan Babylon trinity include Semiramis the mother, Nimrod the father and Tammuz the son. He was the first to connect Semiramis to the whore of Babylon from the Book of Revelation 17 although Semiramis is never mentioned in the Bible in relation to Nimrod. The Bible clearly states that "Cush begat Nimrod," Genesis 10:8 and there is no mention of Nimrod's bride (Mark, 2014) even though no woman is linked with Nimrod in the biblical narrative (Grabbe, 1997, p.28). Many Christian writers' stress on Semiramis as the whore of Babylon and the arch-enemy of the good separates her from an early relationship with a real

Assyrian queen fortunately many other Christians condemned the text is nothing more than anti-Catholic propaganda(Mark,2014). Spite that Assyriology has long demonstrated that this image is illogical, Hislop's book is nevertheless regularly reproduced and shared among conservative Protestant Christians (Grabbe, 1997, p.28).

4. Conclusion

The researchers have concluded that all negative, inaccuracies and controversy regarding the portrayal of Queen Semiramis' personality is highly influenced by political and religious agenda. She is portrayed as a lustful witch practicing black magic by Armenians simply because she was a ruthless warrior – queen who wanted to occupy their land. She is portrayed as an evil, devilish pagan goddess by many because her ancestors held the most powerful men at that time captive as slaves. The researchers recommend spreading awareness about this great queen and highlighting all hidden reasons for distorting the image of this Mesopotamian queen.

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